

# HOW TO BEAT STRESS

THE ULTIMATE GUIDE TO FEELING HAPPIER

**50+**  
Easy Ways  
to Live Your  
Best Life



- Make Time for Yourself
- Find Calm
- Learn to Thrive
- Strengthen Relationships
- Boost Energy
- Sleep Better



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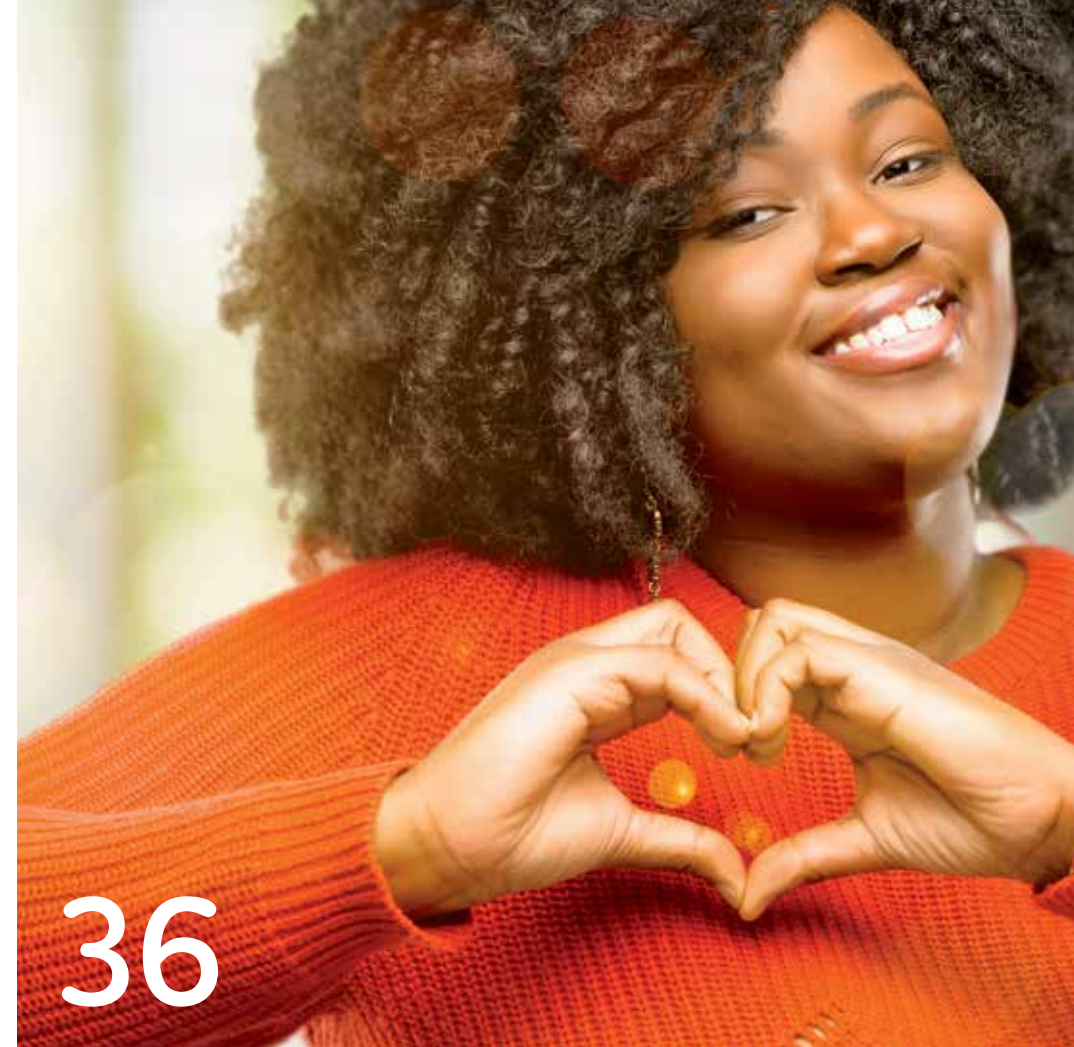
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The background of the entire image is a Zen garden, featuring fine, light-colored sand with intricate, concentric circular ripples. A single, smooth, light-brown stone is placed on the sand in the upper left quadrant of the left half of the image. A white rectangular box with rounded corners is positioned in the center-right of the image, containing the text 'HOW TO BEAT STRESS'.

**HOW TO BEAT**  
**STRESS**



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PART ONE

# DECODING THE PROBLEM

Having to deal with some anxiety is just a part of modern life. Now, the latest science on stress is revealing exactly what that means for body and mind—and empowering us to beat it.



Statistics are showing that we may have turned a corner from peak stress levels during the pandemic.

# THE WAY WE WORRY

At a time when we're all looking to prioritize our health, stress levels have gone through the roof. New research is revealing the causes, plus some helpful coping mechanisms.

| by **Mary Anderson** |

**T**he juggle is real. Our busy lives provide plenty of potential for stress—big, small and pandemic-sized curveballs—and how we handle those pressures can dictate our health as a whole. Over the past two years, experts have been taking our collective pulse on just how stressed out we've become and what that's meant for our mental state. How have we fared in this past year in particular? And have we turned a corner?

One of the notable findings to come out of these snapshots is that older adults seemed to weather the mental strains best while young adults struggled most. "With older adults, there's been good literature to suggest they show more resilience," says Lauren Gerlach, DO, an assistant professor in the department

of psychiatry at the University of Michigan. "You have a whole life context to look back on and reflect on. You're able to put situations in context with other things that you've gone through in the past, and also able to draw on helpful coping strategies that got you through tough times."

When Dr. Gerlach and her colleagues at the University of Michigan polled adults ages 50 to 80

at the beginning of 2021, it was about eight months into the pandemic and vaccines were just beginning to be rolled out. The researchers found that 28% of those adults reported their anxiety had worsened since the start of the pandemic. "Those age 50 to 60 were more likely to report stress, anxiety and depression than older respondents," says Gerlach, describing a segment that is considered part of the sandwich generation, who may juggle care for both children and aging parents. "That might be due to a multitude of factors, such as caregiving, family responsibilities and managing of households with people doing distance learning and working remotely." Interestingly enough, whether one was employed or not didn't seem to move the needle on their stress level. "We did look at the role of employment and it actually

“Those adults who were able to put stressful situations in context have shown more resilience.”

— LAUREN GERLACH, DO

wasn't associated: It didn't predict who had more or less stress or depression," she notes.

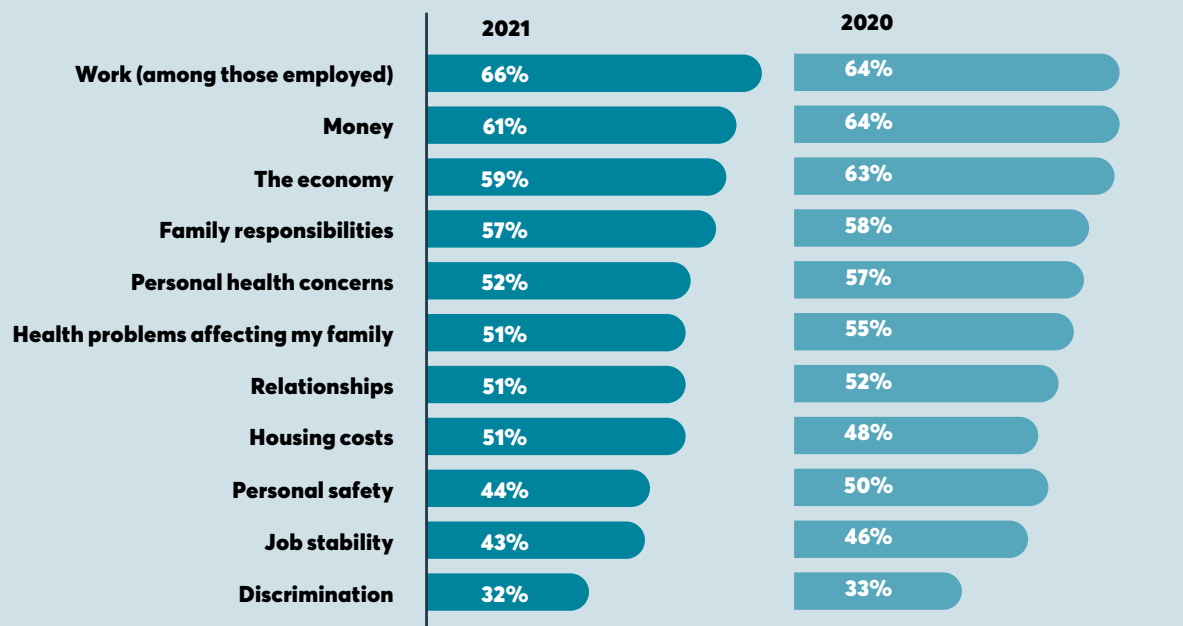
### ARE WE THERE YET?

By August of last year when the American Psychological Association (APA) polled adults nationwide, more than three-quarters of us (77%) said we were faring well at the time and 70% said we were confident that things will work out fine on the other side of the pandemic. "I think one of the things that's important to realize is that people are resilient, and we adapt to all kinds of things," says psychologist Lynn Bufka, PhD, the associate executive director for practice research and policy at the APA. Bufka points to the fact that the APA's annual Stress in America survey has shown that stress levels peak during times of economic downturn only to abate afterward, even given the differences between Hispanic adults, Black adults, Asian adults, and non-Hispanic white



Parents were more likely to find daily decisions extra stressful during the pandemic.

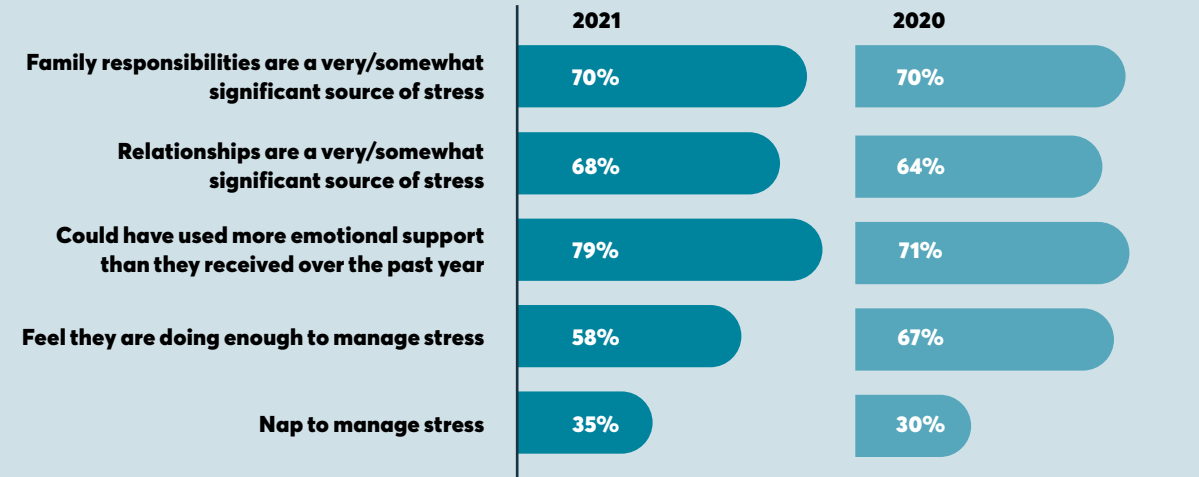
### OUR BIGGEST SOURCES OF STRESS MAY BE WANING



Source: Stress in America™ 2021: Stress and Decision Making During the Pandemic

### NEW PRESSURES ON PARENTS

The findings of the APA survey bear out what many might have already suspected: Parents with children under 18 reported greater levels of stress than non-parents, with a lesser percentage of them saying they're faring well (71% versus 80%). Parents were also more likely to find making day-to-day decisions had become more stressful than pre-pandemic (47% versus 30% among non-parents), especially those parents with children ages 4 and younger.



adults in terms of self-reported levels. "People adapt to very extreme things—like living in war-torn countries and in places like the Arctic—and can survive. But there is a segment of the population that really will struggle and will not figure out how to adapt and may go on to develop longer-term struggles."

The APA's August snapshot did support the thinking that younger adults were having a tougher time rebounding during the pandemic. Not only did Generation Z adults and millennials rate their stress levels higher on a scale of 1 to 10 than Generation X, baby boomers and older adults, but around half of them (45 and 50% respectively) also said that they did not know how to manage the pandemic stress they were feeling at the time—a significantly higher percentage than Generation X (32%), baby boomers (21%) and older adults (12%).

So what can we learn from all these statistics that reveal who is coping best with stress?

### THE TAKEAWAYS

"There's so much in our lives currently that seems to be outside of one's control, but I often will tell people to focus on things that they do have control over," says Gerlach. "First, be willing to reach out for help when needed. Many folks are experiencing depression and anxiety right now and realizing they're not alone—it's okay to talk about it and to receive help for it." Another key to coping is simply building social interaction into your day however you can. "The thing that gives us

resilience during tough times is kind of leaning on and connecting with other people," says Gerlach.

The APA's findings back up the importance of that last point: "People who were saying that they were not as resilient, who were struggling more, were the people who were avoiding social situations and the people who were telling us they could have used more emotional support," says Bufka.

Other important factors that we can control and that impact mental well-being are our diet and physical activity. "When people are feeling stressed, they tend to turn to things that are immediate and perhaps feel good in the moment, but don't necessarily lead to reducing stress or improving health over time," says Bufka about certain common coping mechanisms that don't pay off in the long run. "It's things like, 'I'll just have a glass of wine with dinner tonight,'" or 'I'm too overwhelmed to make a decision, so I'm just going to watch TV,' or 'I don't have the energy to cook and fast food's easy.'" Doing any of

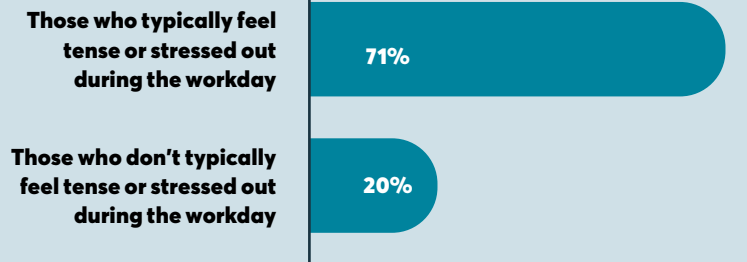
“People tend to turn to things that feel good in the moment but don't necessarily lead to reducing stress.”

— LYNN BUFKA, PhD

### WHAT'S BEHIND THE GREAT RESIGNATION?

Call it the "I quit" that was heard round the world. By August of last year, the monthly quit rate—that is, the number of job quits during the entire month as a percent of total employment—reached an all-time high in this country since the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics started tracking the data in 2000. And the trend apparently continues. According to a 2021 Work and Well-being survey from the American Psychological Association, more than two in five workers polled said they "intend to seek employment outside their company in the next year," which is up from one in three in 2019. One big reason that has us rushing for the door? Stress. Those polled who feel stressed at work were more than three times more likely to say they planned to seek a new job the following year.

### WHO'S CALLING IT QUILTS



Source: Compounding Pressure on the American Workforce ©2021 American Psychological Association

those things on occasion is fine, but over time those ways of responding to stress are problematic. "They're not great for our overall physical health and when our physical health isn't doing that great, our capacity to deal with stress is reduced as well." Indeed, in the University of Michigan study, those respondents who had worse reports of overall physical health were more likely to report worsening mental health symptoms.

"We also know that physical health is closely tied with mental health," says Gerlach. "So it's important that folks focus on being active and really focus on scheduling a routine and keeping a structure as much as possible."

### LOOKING AHEAD

"I think folks are finding ways to kind of adapt to this new normal," says Bufka, who will be working to update the Stress in America report for 2022. "I have seen some renewed hopefulness and a lessening of depression and anxiety as folks find ways to kind of work around some of these challenges and stressors." Comparing the annual APA stats, many big sources of stress—such as money, health concerns and job stability—saw a dip in the percentage of adults reporting them as being significant in their lives. Still, anyone with persistent symptoms of stress should know that they can reach out for professional help if they feel it's

time, says Gerlach. (You can find a psychologist near you through the APA at [locator.apa.org](http://locator.apa.org).) "What we really want to try to make sure that we're doing is preventing this stress and depression and all the negative health effects from becoming chronic issues," says Gerlach. "We're encouraging people to take action, to try to improve their mental health and value that as much as physical health so that we make sure that these aren't long-term consequences of the pandemic."

59%

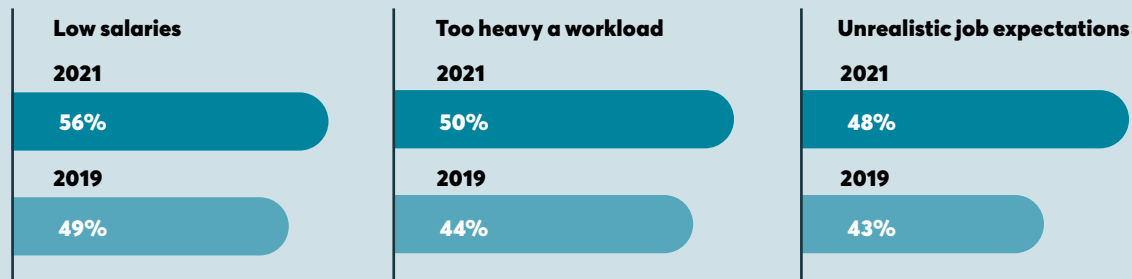
of workers felt negative impacts from job-related stress



Valuing your mental health as much as your physical health is important.

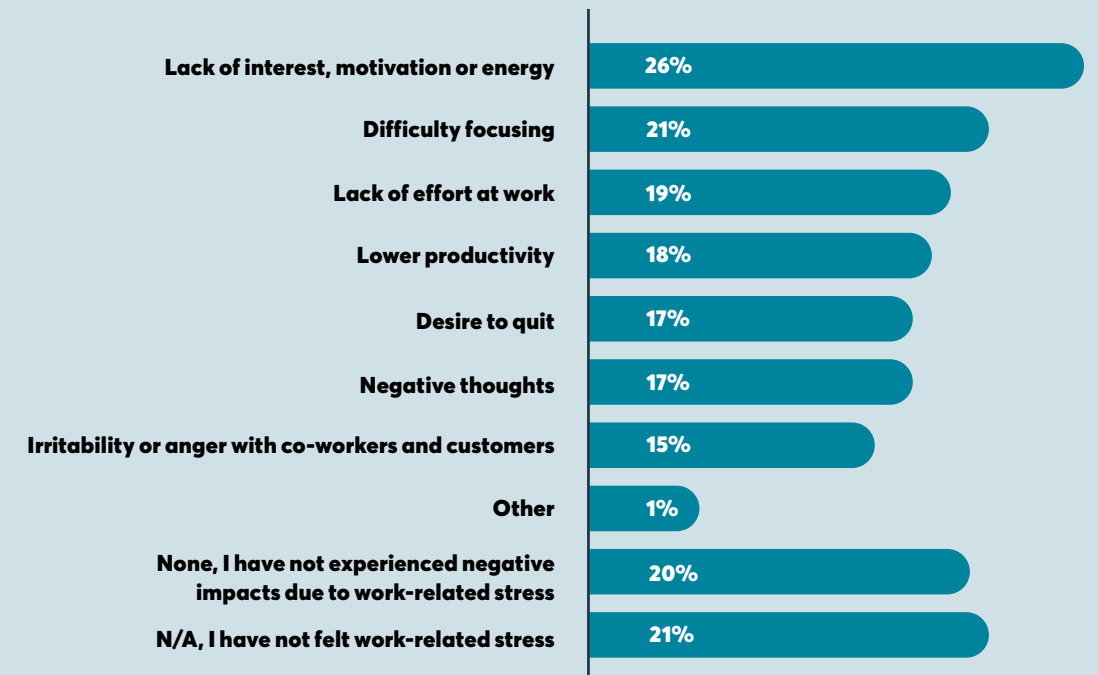
### WHY WORKERS ARE STRESSED OUT

Low salaries, heavy workloads and unrealistic job expectations were more commonly cited as job-related pain points than before the pandemic.



Source: Compounding Pressure on the American Workforce ©2021 American Psychological Association

### THE SIDE EFFECTS OF JOB-RELATED STRESS



Source: Compounding Pressure on the American Workforce ©2021 American Psychological Association



Your body's stress response may kick in when you're speaking in public, then quickly subside.

# GOOD STRESS, BAD STRESS

As we go about our day, our nervous system is continually negotiating how best to meet the mental and physical demands. Here's the big picture.

| by **Mary Anderson** |

**F**rom the time you wake up racing the clock to get ready for work until the day's end when you scroll through the latest news, you might face any number of ups and downs that could trigger stress, or what scientists call the “fight or flight” response from your sympathetic nervous system. Even when the feeling is fleeting—the dash to make the bus or a big meeting—it causes the release of the stress hormones adrenaline, noradrenaline and cortisol, which ready you for action.

Your heart beats faster with stronger contractions; your muscles tense; you breathe faster; and your blood pressure goes up as certain blood vessels dilate to boost circulation. And when the stress passes—pew, you made it to your bus seat—your body readily returns to its normal state as the parasympathetic nervous system gives the all clear to turn off the stress hormones and switch to “rest and digest” mode.

Stress has mostly become a dirty word in modern times, synonymous with a feeling of mental overload and anxiety, but if you think of it in the framework of its evolutionary



Exercise is one type of stress that does your body good.

“To achieve great things, two things are needed: a plan, and not quite enough time.”

—LEONARD BERNSTEIN

purpose, you can come to regard it more as a tool than an albatross. “It’s really about how we personify the stress and how we allow our body to react,” says Heather Moday, MD, author of *The Immunotype Breakthrough: Your Personalized Plan to Balance Your Immune System, Optimize Health, and Build Lifelong Resilience*. “Obviously there are things that happen to us that we can’t necessarily control, and we have this sympathetic stress response—that evolutionary response that, before we even really cognitively think about it, we jump out of the way of a car for example.” It’s our later response that significantly dictates whether the stress hormones that come to our rescue stay elevated or not, notes Dr. Moday. And the good news, she says, is “we have much more control over that later response.”

### HOW STRESS CAN BE BENEFICIAL

“We misunderstand stress. We think stress is a bad thing and it’s not necessarily,” says Arielle Schwartz, PhD, a psychologist in Boulder, Colorado. “When our sympathetic nervous system or our fight or flight mode keys in, that’s okay. It’s going to simply mobilize us through the world—and we need that.” In other words, whether you want to go for a job interview or get on your yoga mat, there are any number of occasions

when you need that sympathetic nervous system response to kick in. “We don’t want to just be in a parasympathetic state all the time,” says Schwartz. “It would actually not facilitate optimal health.”

You may be surprised to learn that the body naturally secretes the stress hormone cortisol throughout the day, with levels peaking at around 7 a.m. to help you tackle your to-dos and then declining until hitting a low point at midnight. In between, we can experience surges of cortisol in response to various mental or physical challenges. Exercise, for example, is perceived by the body as stress, but it is essential for our well-being in countless ways. Such acute bouts of stress actually help strengthen our body and immune system.

And the mere fact of having a lot of pressures to field does not fate us to a state in which anxiety remains humming on high. “There are many people out there who might have a really stressful life but they don’t worry about it. They tell themselves, I’m going to manage it. It’s going to be fine,” says Moday. That mindset can check our body’s stress response and make us more resilient.

### WHEN ANXIETY IS ONGOING

What we want to avoid is the chronic kind of stress wherein the cortisol surge continues indefinitely, the type that comes from constant worry or tension. “It’s the hormone release that really causes the damage or the changes that occur to the body over time from stress,” explains Moday. Although cortisol acts as an anti-inflammatory in the body in small doses, it becomes a different story when levels stay elevated for long periods. “It flips: Cortisol actually starts downregulating some of our good immune responses,” she says. The negative trickle-down



### QUICK RESETS FOR TENSE MOMENTS

One way to diffuse worry is to take a timeout. “We can stop and say, ‘OK, is this something I really need to be ruminating on?’” says Heather Moday, MD. “Sometimes we’re thinking about things that haven’t even happened to us.” To redirect your mind to the present, try going for a walk and focusing on your footsteps or breath. Meditation also helps and, if you need guidance, you can turn to an app. Dr. Moday’s favorites: Calm, Insight Timer, Headspace and Breethe.

effects on our health are wide-ranging, as detailed on the following pages of this section.

Luckily, the tools to cope with and counteract stress are also in your hands—and in this issue.

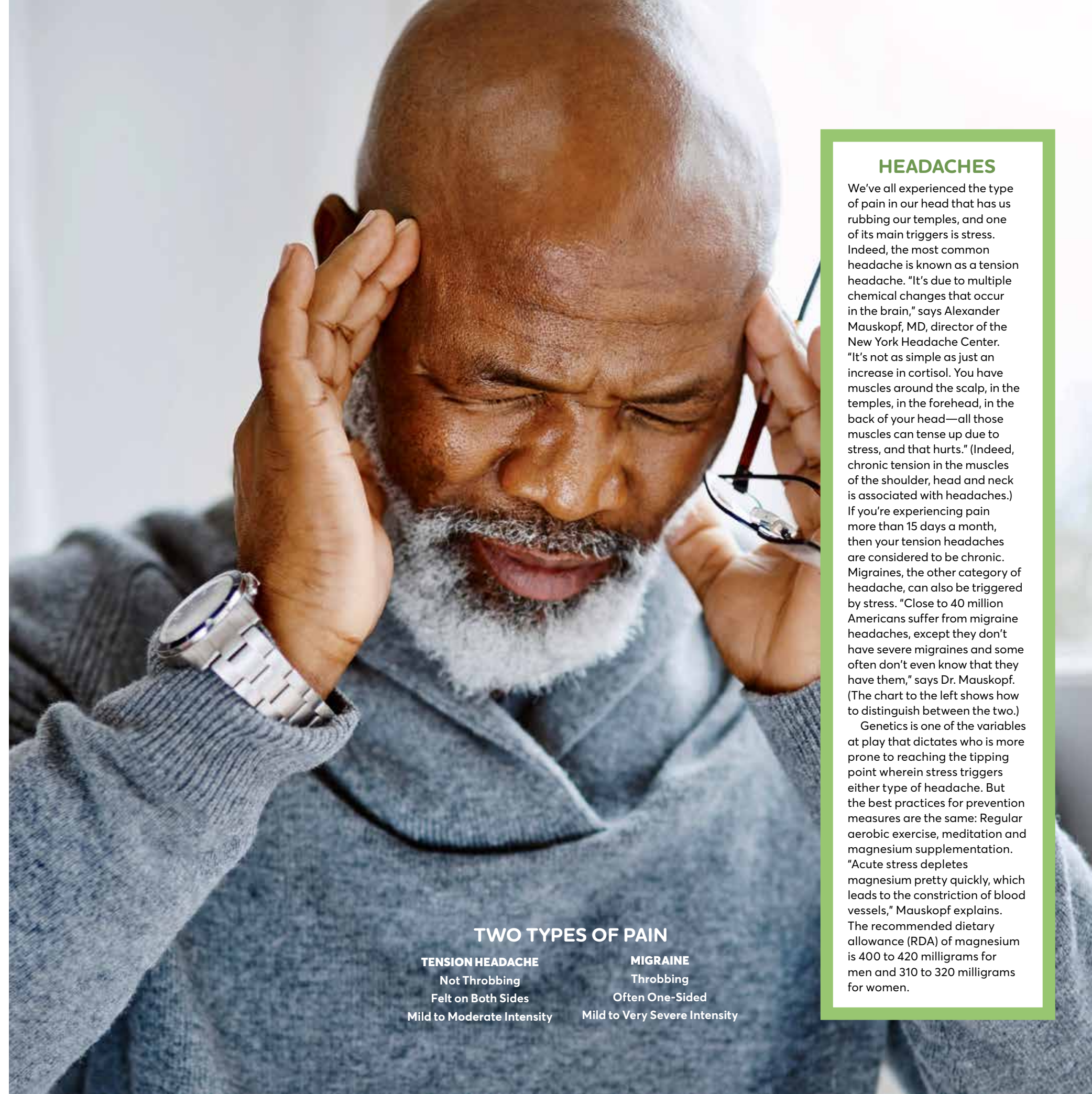
# FIVE WAYS STRESS MESSES WITH YOUR BODY

It pays to take control of your tension level, as the resulting ripple effects can impact nearly every aspect of your health.

| by Mary Anderson |

**H**ow exactly does a mechanism that gives the body the resources it needs to take action have such ill consequences when experienced in excess? To get at the root of the impact of the stress response on overdrive, it helps to look at the chain reaction that produces it more closely. As you perceive a challenge or threat, your brain sets off the alarm via your body's endocrine system, which is driven by what is called the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis. The distress signal is relayed first from the hypothalamus, a bundle of nuclei that links the brain with the endocrine system, to the pituitary gland, which is located within the brain's gray matter. From there, the pituitary gland produces a hormone that signals the adrenal glands just above the kidneys to ramp up the production of steroid hormones, including cortisol. The essential function of cortisol is to spark the mobilization of quick fuel—in the form of glucose and fatty acids—from the liver for the body to use.

When the body perceives stress for prolonged periods, this process shows signs of wear and tear, breaking down communication between the HPA access and the immune system. Over time, this breakdown leads to various health conditions, including depression, heart disease and diabetes. But even along the way, prolonged levels of high stress can register in the body in perceptible ways. This head-to-toe look sheds light on some of both the near- and long-term physical impacts—as well as ways to be proactive in counteracting them.



## HEADACHES

We've all experienced the type of pain in our head that has us rubbing our temples, and one of its main triggers is stress. Indeed, the most common headache is known as a tension headache. "It's due to multiple chemical changes that occur in the brain," says Alexander Mouskopf, MD, director of the New York Headache Center. "It's not as simple as just an increase in cortisol. You have muscles around the scalp, in the temples, in the forehead, in the back of your head—all those muscles can tense up due to stress, and that hurts." (Indeed, chronic tension in the muscles of the shoulder, head and neck is associated with headaches.) If you're experiencing pain more than 15 days a month, then your tension headaches are considered to be chronic. Migraines, the other category of headache, can also be triggered by stress. "Close to 40 million Americans suffer from migraine headaches, except they don't have severe migraines and some often don't even know that they have them," says Dr. Mouskopf. (The chart to the left shows how to distinguish between the two.)

Genetics is one of the variables at play that dictates who is more prone to reaching the tipping point where stress triggers either type of headache. But the best practices for prevention measures are the same: Regular aerobic exercise, meditation and magnesium supplementation. "Acute stress depletes magnesium pretty quickly, which leads to the constriction of blood vessels," Mouskopf explains. The recommended dietary allowance (RDA) of magnesium is 400 to 420 milligrams for men and 310 to 320 milligrams for women.

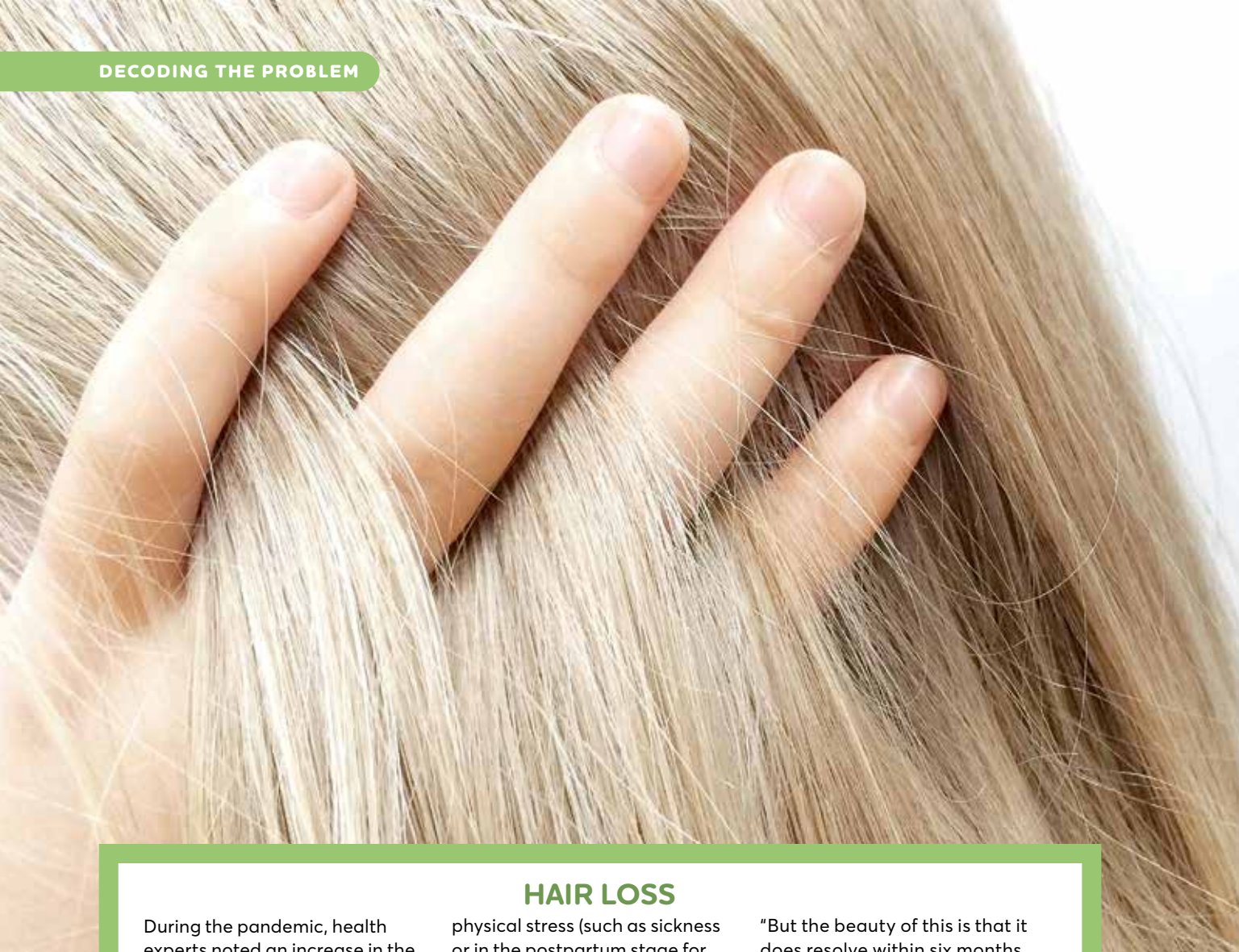
## TWO TYPES OF PAIN

### TENSION HEADACHE

Not Throbbing  
Felt on Both Sides  
Mild to Moderate Intensity

### MIGRAINE

Throbbing  
Often One-Sided  
Mild to Very Severe Intensity



### HAIR LOSS

During the pandemic, health experts noted an increase in the number of people experiencing hair loss even beyond the condition being a side effect of COVID-19 itself. "The type of hair loss which is stress-induced is called telogen effluvium. It is diffuse shedding that can come from any kind of physical or emotional stress and we're definitely seeing more from factors surrounding the pandemic," says Shilpi Khetarpal, MD, a board-certified dermatologist at the Cleveland Clinic in Ohio. "We don't characterize this as everyday stress. It's more like a major life event on a par with divorce or the death of a loved one that is triggering this." Though the connection between shedding and

physical stress (such as sickness or in the postpartum stage for women) are fairly straightforward, says Dr. Khetarpal, "we don't know exactly how emotional stress causes hair loss."

In a healthy hair cycle, normally around 85% of hairs are in the growth phase, 5% are resting, and around 10% are shedding, or in what is called the telogen phase. After a stressful period, up to 50% of hairs can be pushed into the telogen phase prematurely, a shedding you'll notice about eight to 10 weeks after the stressful event. That means fewer hairs are growing or resting but many more are shedding, which results in the volume of your hair thinning.

"But the beauty of this is that it does resolve within six months and the hair does come back," says Khetarpal.

While working to minimize your stress level, there are a few science-backed ways she suggests to support new hair growth, such as making sure you're nutritionally covering your bases with a daily multivitamin and a well-balanced diet with adequate protein. (The RDA for protein is 0.8 grams per kilogram of body weight.) "Protein is one of the building blocks for our hair and our nails," she notes. "And then those who are not pregnant or nursing can use topical minoxidil, a treatment which is sold over the counter, to speed up the process of hair growth."

**SIGNS OF STRESS-RELATED SHEDDING** Different conditions can be responsible for hair loss but when it's due to stress, there should be no other symptoms such as itching, burning or pain. "The scalp will look normal, and you are just going to see hair everywhere on your pillow and on your clothes," says Dr. Khetarpal. "If there is redness, scaling or itching, then it's probably something else that's going on."

### HEART DISEASE

When the heart gets the sign from stress hormones such as cortisol, it speeds up and intensifies its contractions to increase circulation to the large muscles necessary to react. Meanwhile, blood vessels dilate to maximize the flow and blood pressure increases. When stress doesn't let up and your body regularly experiences that increased heart rate and blood pressure throughout the day, it can elevate your risk for heart attack, hypertension and stroke. "There are multiple associations between stress and heart disease and one is that the sympathetic nervous system response can cause a constriction of blood vessels, increase in heart rate and increase in blood pressure," says Heather Moday, MD, author of *The Immunotype Breakthrough: Your Personalized Plan to Balance Your Immune System, Optimize Health, and Build Lifelong Resilience*.

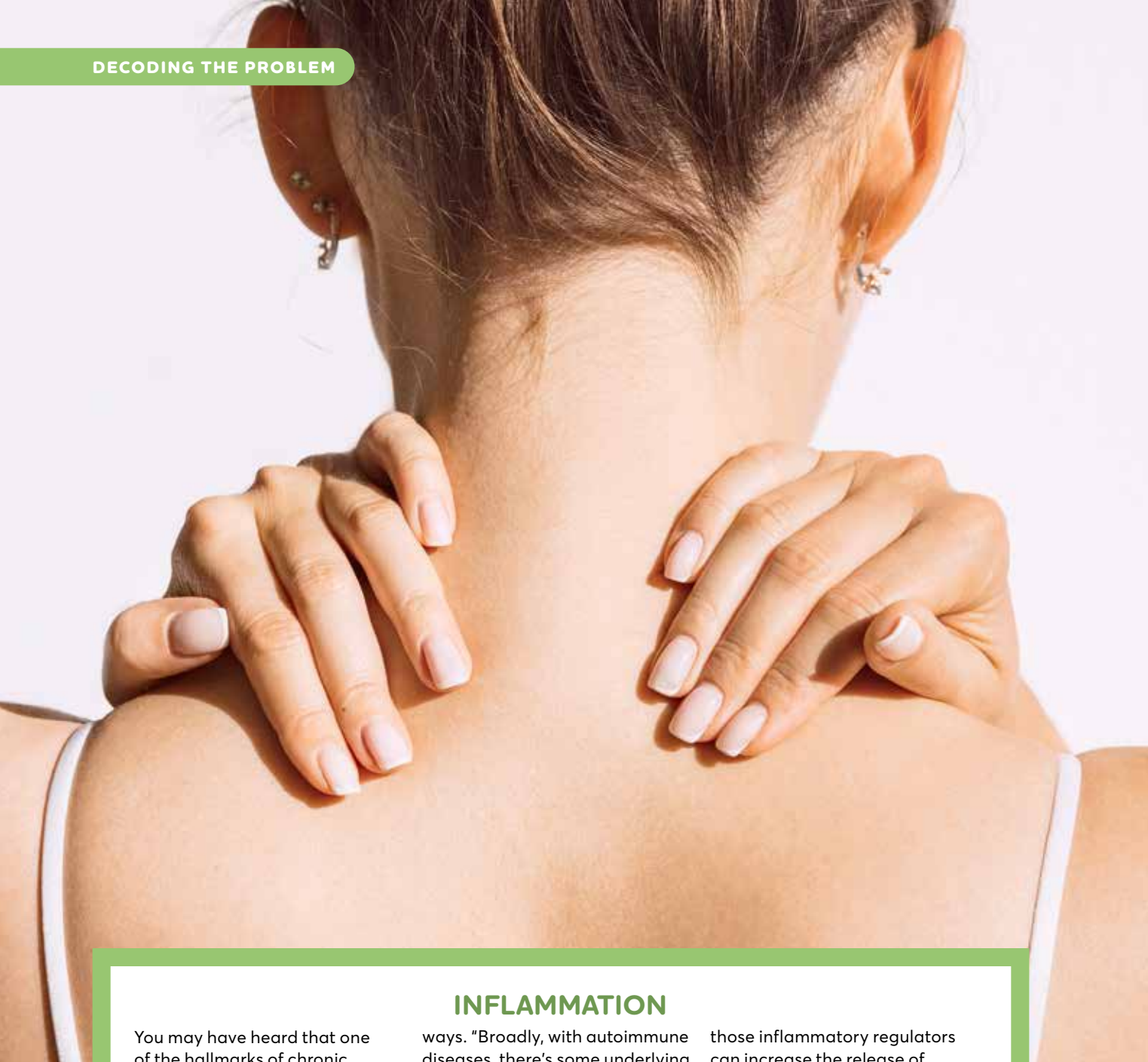
With heart disease, plaque develops in blood vessels like arteries as an immune response to damage that must be repaired. "It's like putting grout over a damaged brick and it gets larger and bumpier. And that attracts more things to get stuck to it," says Dr. Moday. "If you have a very stressful event and the artery starts to constrict more, you might have a loosening of the plaque, and if it dislodges, it ends up blocking a blood vessel."

Again here, regular exercise has a key protective effect. Not only can it reduce stress in the moment but also condition the heart muscle. The American Heart Association (AHA) recommends at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity exercise a week, or 75 minutes of vigorous intensity.

### CHECK YOUR PULSE

Aim for a resting heart rate between 60 to 100 beats per minute, the normal range for adults. A lower rate can indicate your heart is in better condition. (Test it before getting out of bed in the morning.)





### INFLAMMATION

You may have heard that one of the hallmarks of chronic stress is that it leads to a state of perpetual, low-grade inflammation in the body. "Our body is always in the process of trying to repair, but it's when we have a buildup of areas that are in need of repair that it becomes chronically inflamed," explains Heather Moday, MD. This sort of inflammation is not visible, like a sprained ankle, but takes its toll on our health in a number of

ways. "Broadly, with autoimmune diseases, there's some underlying inflammation—there's a misguided immune response, and then we get tissue destruction rather than repair."

The role that stress plays in inflammation is that chronically high levels of cortisol can send the message to turn up our immune response indefinitely. "Inflammatory regulators in the body can be turned on when there's chronic cortisol. And so

those inflammatory regulators can increase the release of infection fighters called cytokines, which can put us in a more inflamed state," says Dr. Moday.

Her list of best practices to keeping inflammation at bay includes steps that also help mitigate stress: Eating a healthy diet—especially avoiding trans fats and excess sugar and alcohol—staying active and getting the recommended seven to nine hours of sleep nightly.

**SIGNS OF A CHRONIC CONDITION** This is a case in which there is no single thing you perceive in your body that can reveal an unhealthy level of inflammation within. Your doctor can order what is called a C-reactive protein test to spot inflammation and help diagnose its source.

### BELLY FAT

The connection between stress and weight gain can be a mix of factors linked to elevated cortisol, from the way the stress hormone spurs an increase in appetite to its effect on how the body stores fat. "Cortisol stimulates the lipoprotein lipase [LPL], which is the gatekeeper for fat into cells. An excess of cortisol is going to favor the storage of fat," says Eric Ravussin, MD, an obesity and diabetes expert at the Pennington Biomedical Research Center in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. "On average, it goes more toward the central fat deposition and especially the abdominal fat, but it varies from person to person."

If you picture your midsection, there are two kinds of body fat there: subcutaneous fat, which is just below the skin, and visceral fat, which surrounds the organs. "The real bad one is the visceral fat in the intra-abdominal cavity—this is around your heart, around your liver and also in your liver," says Dr. Ravussin. "This fat is the most liable for your health and for your mental health."

The American Heart Association released findings last year that revealed people with too much abdominal fat were at increased risk for heart disease, even if their body mass index (BMI) was in a healthy range. A BMI of between 18.5 and 25 is considered a normal weight. Search for the BMI calculator at [nhlbi.nih.gov](http://nhlbi.nih.gov) to determine yours.

As the sensation of hunger itself can lead to an increased cortisol level, Ravussin notes that having regular, healthy meals is one way to stop the cycle of stress and craving. "Eat before you become hungry," he says. And get proper sleep. "Short sleep duration is associated with obesity, and it's been shown over and over."

### YOUR HEALTHIEST WAISTLINE

**WOMEN < 35 inches**

**MEN < 40 inches**

According to the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute, a waistline larger than these measurements puts you at higher risk for heart disease and Type 2 diabetes.





A healthy diet can help buffer stress by keeping your gastrointestinal tract happy.

# GUT REACTION

Our bodies are wired so that the digestive tract and the brain are in constant communication. Here's what that means for the knot in your stomach and how to calm it.

| by Mary Anderson |

**T**he saying goes that the way to one's heart is through the stomach, but science suggests that intestinal road is actually an express route to the organ farther north: the brain. More and more, we're hearing about the gut-brain as a synergistic entity and one that largely commands our overall sense of well-being. It turns out, your gut health can drive many of the body's stress signals and serve as a feedback loop for your anxiety.

## THE BELLY-BRAIN SUPERHIGHWAY

Your digestive tract—encompassing the mouth, pharynx, esophagus, stomach, intestine and anus—is connected to the brain via the vagus nerve, which is the longest in the body, starting from the brain stem and wending its way to the belly. “The entire digestive tract is lined by its own nervous system, called the enteric nervous system,” explains gastroenterologist Laura Frado, MD, at New York Gastroenterology Associates. “This is directly connected with the central nervous

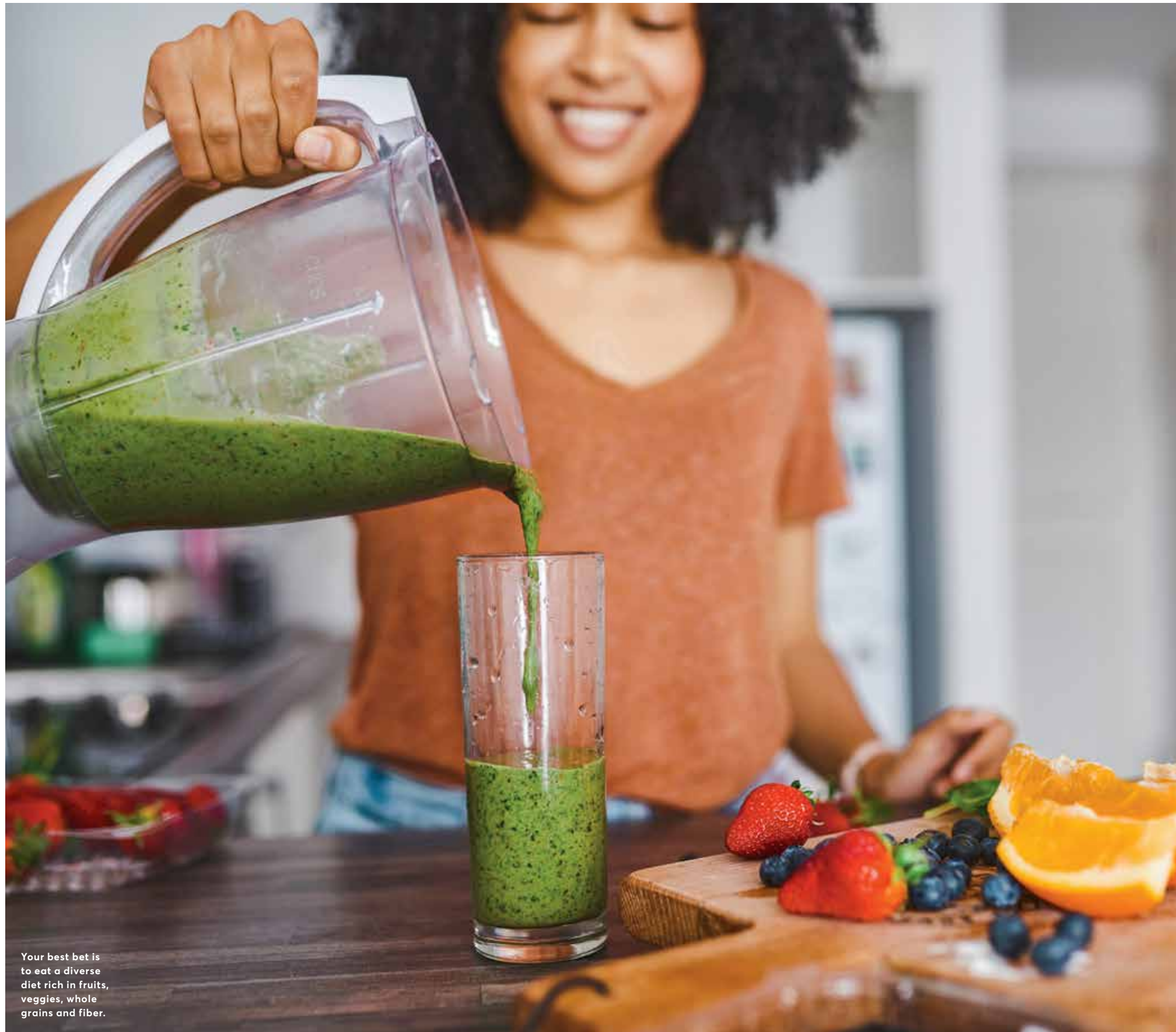
system, made up of the brain and spinal cord.” The vagus nerve serves as the high-speed cable between the two, with tiny messengers in the form of hormones and neuromodulators floating through the blood stream and relaying information back and forth.

When the body perceives stressful thoughts—it can't tell the difference whether that's due to dreading a big

**6 Pounds**

**Weight of bacteria we may carry in our gut. But gut health is about quality, not quantity: The more diversity of microbes you have within that total, the better.**

Source: National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health



Your best bet is to eat a diverse diet rich in fruits, veggies, whole grains and fiber.

meeting, getting stuck in traffic, or truly being chased by a bear—it switches into a fight or flight state as opposed to rest and digest mode. One of the consequences is that blood flow is shunted away from the digestive tract to the muscles in your limbs as fuel to outrun that grizzly. “When someone is in a chronic state of stress, the rest and digest state is not prioritized,” says Heather Finley, DCN, RD, a doctor of clinical nutrition in Dallas. And with less blood flow being directed to the gastrointestinal tract, tummy troubles can ensue (more on those later).

In the reverse gut-brain communication, “you might be getting stress from the gut sent right up to your brain, and that could be manifesting in brain fog or sleep issues or lack of energy,” says Finley. “In fact, there’s more information going from your gut to your brain than there is from your brain to your gut.”

### THE IMPORTANCE OF A HAPPY STOMACH

“We are just starting to understand the relationship between our microbiome and our health,” says

2 Weeks

A recent study found that boosting daily fiber intake to between 40 to 50 grams for two weeks increased diversity in the gut by 8%.

Source: University of California, Irvine

## DO I NEED PREBIOTICS AND POSTBIOTICS?

The National Institutes of Health define prebiotics as “nondigestible food components that selectively stimulate the growth or activity of desirable microorganisms.” They contain the dietary fiber that probiotics feed on so they play a vital role. “Some of the easiest and most versatile prebiotic foods to include in your diet are garlic and onions, chia seeds and ground flaxseeds—use them in salad dressing, baking, smoothies and cereal—and beans and lentils,” says dietitian Dawn Jackson Blatner, RD, LDN, author of *The Flexitarian Diet*. To fit in the latter, she suggests snacking on roasted chickpeas or hummus, having lentil or black bean burritos, or making bean-based burgers or chili. As for postbiotics, those are the end products of having prebiotics and probiotics. “You eat fiber, your gut bugs [probiotics] eat the fiber, and produce postbiotics, or short-chain fatty acids, which are anti-inflammatory,” explains dietitian Heather Finley, CDN. Postbiotics are found in fermented foods like yogurt, kefir, kimchi and sauerkraut.

### BOTTOM LINE

“Supplementing with postbiotics is new, but research is looking good on these having benefit,” Jackson Blatner says, adding, “Food-first is always the most powerful approach. Supplements can be a great addition once you have a solid base with your nutrition and lifestyle.”

Dr. Frado, referencing the teeming collection of microorganisms, including bacteria and fungi, that inhabit our body, specifically those in our gut. These good bacteria do things like help us digest food and fight disease. “We do know that there are major associations with a healthy and diverse microbiome [mitigating] certain disease states such as obesity, depression, gastrointestinal illnesses and autoimmune conditions.” When the gut’s microbiome is out of balance, she notes, “it can allow

for inflammatory particles to have easier access to our system and thus lead to inflammation and possibly predispose us to certain disease states, which may then lead to mental health issues.”

And there may be a more direct way that our microbiome is affecting our behavior and emotion, according to the National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health (NCCIH) at the National Institutes of Health: Research on mice found those that had been fed

a probiotic bacteria that contained a neurotransmitter called GABA (gamma-aminobutyric acid) showed more relaxed behavior.

### A FEEL-BAD FEEDBACK LOOP

In the case of acute stress—say in the minutes before you give a big speech—the reason you may run straight to the bathroom is a spike in gut movement. “That’s a physiological response,” says Finley. “It’s the body saying, I need to focus on the stress that’s about



### DO A GUT CHECK

How do you know whether your microbiome is healthy? “If you are experiencing diarrhea, constipation, significant abdominal pain, gas or bloating it may indicate a problem with your microbiome,” says Laura Frado, MD. And mind your bowel movements. There’s no rule that says you need to have a bowel movement daily—it’s considered normal to go three times per day to once every three days—but it’s best, she notes, if “stools are formed, not too hard or loose and easy to pass, and there isn’t any discomfort between bowel movements.”



Fermented foods like kimchi are a great source of probiotics.

### THE SCOOP ON PROBIOTICS

You hear the term a lot but may not know what these good bacteria are touted to do. “Having the right mix of probiotics in our gut may improve regularity, gas or bloating, immunity, cravings, mood, and beyond,” says dietician Dawn Jackson Blatner. “A good rule of thumb is to make sure you have a wide variety of different probiotic strains in your diet.” While she notes that not all “live and active cultures” you see on the label of fermented foods can be technically called probiotics, she recommends the options below.

- ▶ Yogurt (¾ cup)
- ▶ Kefir (1 cup)
- ▶ Sauerkraut (2 tablespoons)
- ▶ Kimchi (2 tablespoons)
- ▶ Fermented vegetable brine (2 ounces)
- ▶ Cultured cottage cheese (½ cup)
- ▶ Kombucha (1 cup)

to occur. And so you can experience loose stool or what’s called ‘dumping syndrome.’” Your gut experiencing chronic stress is another story.

You may not realize that your large and small intestines are made up of smooth muscle. And just like all other muscles in your body, they need blood to contract and do their job. Yet, the more time the body spends in fight-or-flight mode, the less circulation is getting to those digestive tract muscles. “If they’re not getting adequate fuel, they’re going to slow down,” says Finley. “That can definitely cause the bloating, gas, and upset stomach that people feel whenever they’re stressed.” Over time, the flow of digestive enzymes and stomach acid decreases as the magnesium that is key in their production depletes when you are stressed. “It can just be a vicious cycle because you don’t necessarily feel super good. And then you’re stressed about not feeling good,” she says. “Then the cycle repeats itself.”

### EAT TO OPTIMIZE YOUR MICROBIOME

“I like to empower people to take control of their digestive health by having an abundance mindset versus viewing it as a restrictive lifestyle,” says Finley. “If you always buy kale, can you buy arugula one week? Can you add seeds or different nuts to the snacks that you’re eating?”

Big picture, try to follow a more plant-based diet, says Frado, or a Mediterranean diet. “It is a good starting point to make some healthy changes for your gut microbiome.” Here are some of her top tips.

- ▶ Eat a diverse diet rich in fruits, veggies, whole grains, and high fiber
- ▶ Drinks lots of water and avoid sugary artificial drinks
- ▶ Minimize processed meat, red meat, alcohol, sugar and processed foods with additives like high fructose corn syrup and food dyes
- ▶ Eat probiotic-rich foods—check out the list of them in “The Scoop on Probiotics” box at left



Medical professionals and teachers suffered greatly through the pandemic, but this issue affects us all.

# WHEN IT'S BURNOUT

In this time of seismic work-life shifts and blurred lines between office and home, many of us wonder whether the label could apply to our own state of mind. Find answers here.

| by Kimberly Ahearn Young, LCSW |

**E**ven before we started hearing about the Great Resignation, there were signs of an increasing awareness of burnout. The World Health Organization added burnout to its International Classification of Diseases in 2019, describing it as an “occupational phenomenon” rather than a strictly medical condition. The term itself gives most people enough of a picture to guess at the broad strokes of this state of physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion. But how to recognize the tipping point where feeling crazy-busy turns to burnout? In the American Psychological Association’s definition, “it results from performing at a high level until stress and tension, especially from extreme and prolonged physical or mental exertion or an overburdening workload, take their toll.”

If you trace the burnout surge by the news, the first wave hit health care workers on the front lines as they became overwhelmed from treating COVID-19 cases, then working parents who were home-schooling kids seemed to reach their multitasking limits, and now the spotlight is on, well, any of us who are experiencing the new normal of work after it has so thoroughly invaded our home lives. In my psychotherapy practice—I have been a licensed clinical social worker in New York City for 23 years—I am seeing more and more burnout in my patients, which has most certainly been heightened by the pandemic. And yes, they are physicians and parents and people of all professions.

One patient—let’s call her Ellen—is a doctor at a busy New York City hospital, and describes punishing days of seeing patient after patient while others on shift regularly call out sick, leaving her with no backup. She is often on the verge of tears in our sessions because she feels pulled at from so many directions.

“Jason” had largely managed to get his anxiety under control but was experiencing a recent spike. I dug in to try to figure out why. “I think it’s work,” he said. Jason had just been promoted at his job, a position he worked hard for, but now, he said, “the emails never stop. I can’t even finish reading a chain of emails before my boss asks why I haven’t replied.”

University of California, Berkeley, and co-editor of the journal *Burnout Research*, who developed a widely used measure of burnout. Early on, studies began to pick up on the sort of work tendencies that strain our health. Back in 1974, cardiologists Meyer Friedman, MD, and R.H. Rosenman, MD, famous for studying the differences between types A

to doctor’s appointments, take their medication and stay safe as they age. All could use tools to manage this form of extreme stress.

### HOW DO YOU GUARD AGAINST IT?

You don’t always have a say when it comes to hard and fast deadlines or the coming busy season, but a couple key strategies can provide buffers to becoming overwhelmed. First, set boundaries. Be clear about how much you can and are willing to handle. To help visualize your priorities, try this exercise from Heather Edwards, LMHC, a psychotherapist and life coach in New York City who works with her clients to help clarify all that they own, and what is the responsibility of others: “Draw a large circle on a piece of paper. Draw a smaller circle in its center. In the large circle, brain dump everything that is a concern to you. In the center circle write down what you actually have control over. Notice the differences.” Next, learn to say no. We all want a leg up at work; we all want to show that we are willing to work hard. But if your plate is full and you cannot do an assignment without sacrificing sleep, personal life, and your health, say no, says Jill Lewis, LCSW, a therapist in Atlanta who specializes in eating disorders, and has seen an uptick in cases fueled by

**27.7%** of workers polled did not use their paid time off and 52% said they worked during their time off.

Source: 2018 research conducted by the U.S. Travel Association, Oxford Economics and Ipsos

Making matters worse, he said, is the fact that he is working with new colleagues whom he has never met in person because of the pandemic. “It’s not like I can go into my co-worker’s office to vent about it,” he said with exasperation. “Denise” who started a new and exciting job early in the pandemic, has talked lately of a complete lack of interest in work and difficulty mustering energy to log on each morning. She is so tired when she clocks out at 7 or 8 p.m. each night that she cannot summon the will to go to the gym or play piano, which has long been a creative outlet for her. What these snapshots show is that when our systems are inundated with more stressful stimulation than we can handle, we burn out.

and B personalities, discovered that high-risk heart patients shared some common characteristics related to work: a chronic and/or severe sense of time urgency; involvement in multiple projects with deadlines; desire for recognition and advancement to enhance self-esteem; neglect of most aspects of life outside of work; and a habit of taking on excessive responsibility. A 1993 study by Lennart Hallsten, PhD, currently an associate professor in the department of clinical neuroscience at the Karolinska Institutet in Sweden, found that people who value positive outcomes related to work, and whose identity is connected with this, are more likely to suffer from burnout.

The good news is, there are ways to reclaim your sense of well-being and control without quitting your job and giving up your goals. The first step is taking stock of where you stand.

### WHAT ARE THE SIGNS?

The three big components are overwhelming exhaustion, cynicism and detachment from one’s job, and a sense of ineffectiveness and lack of accomplishment, according to research by Christina Maslach, PhD, a professor emeritus at the

Work is the most obvious culprit we look at for burnout, but stress overload shows up in plenty of other scenarios. Harried and exhausted parents know all too well what it feels like to try to balance feeding and caring for your children, earning a living, and maintaining some semblance of housekeeping. Students struggle with mounds of homework, daily sports practices and test prep. Adults caring for elderly parents feel the physical and emotional weight of helping their family members get

### TOP THREE DIMENSIONS OF BURNOUT

- ▶ Overwhelming exhaustion
- ▶ Cynicism and detachment
- ▶ A sense of ineffectiveness and lack of accomplishment

Source: Maslach Burnout Inventory Manual, fourth edition, 2016



Setting boundaries on what you are capable or willing to do can help prevent suffering in silence.

stress created during the pandemic. “As the level of need from clients put more stress on myself and my clinicians, it has meant saying no to always being on call,” she says. “We created our own mental health days to take breaks, adjusted schedules to not get overwhelmed, turn our phones off after hours and put on out-of-office messages.”

### WHAT CAN HELP BREAK THE MENTAL EXHAUSTION CYCLE?

It’s a matter of addressing the external pressures we face as well as the internal pressures we put on ourselves. For the former, it’s important to be an advocate for yourself and to speak up. I

often rehearse with my patients what they can say to, or ask of, their managers—maybe more flexible hours are needed or extra compensation is in order—so they are not suffering in silence. This can be challenging for people who struggle with confrontation; if that’s you, try turning to friends to help you find your voice. As for the latter, worrying less about perfection helps. Psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott famously wrote about the idea of the “good enough mother” sufficing for children to experience a healthy upbringing. Your efforts don’t need to be perfect for a successful outcome—oftentimes they just have to be good enough to get the job done.

**42%**

of women and 35% of men reported feeling burned out often or almost always in 2021. That’s up from 32% and 28% respectively in 2020.

Source: Annual Women in the Workplace report from McKinsey & Co. and leanin.org



PART TWO

# FINDING BALANCE

Learn the surprising ways that you can fortify yourself against stress, from shifting your mindset to taking steps to help tackle your biggest worries.



# HOW STRESS-PROOF ARE YOU?

You may not contemplate your level of self-compassion, but showing yourself more of it reduces agita and enhances motivation. Take this quiz, created by the Greater Good Science Center at the University of California, Berkeley, in collaboration with psychology professor Kristin Neff, PhD, author of *Fierce Self-Compassion*, to identify how you typically treat yourself when upset. The average of your answers will reveal how you rate on the scale at right.

1

I try to be patient and understanding toward the aspects of my personality that I don't like.

1. Almost Never
2. Sometimes
3. About Half the Time
4. Fairly Often
5. Almost Always

2

When I'm feeling down, I tend to obsess and fixate on everything that's wrong.

1. Almost Never
2. Sometimes
3. About Half the Time
4. Fairly Often
5. Almost Always

3

When things are going badly for me, I see the difficulties as part of life that everyone goes through.

1. Almost Never
2. Sometimes
3. About Half the Time
4. Fairly Often
5. Almost Always

4

When I'm feeling down, I try to approach my feelings with curiosity and openness.

1. Almost Never
2. Sometimes
3. About Half the Time

4. Fairly Often
5. Almost Always

5

When I think about my inadequacies, it tends to make me feel more separate and cut off from the rest of the world.

1. Almost Never
2. Sometimes
3. About Half the Time
4. Fairly Often
5. Almost Always

6

I try to be loving toward myself when I'm feeling emotional pain.

1. Almost Never
2. Sometimes
3. About Half the Time
4. Fairly Often
5. Almost Always

7

When I fail at something important to me, I become consumed by feelings of inadequacy.

1. Almost Never
2. Sometimes
3. About Half the Time
4. Fairly Often
5. Almost Always

8

When I'm down and out, I remind myself that there are lots of other people in the world feeling like I am.

1. Almost Never
2. Sometimes
3. About Half the Time
4. Fairly Often
5. Almost Always

9

When something upsets me, I try to keep my emotions in balance.

1. Almost Never
2. Sometimes
3. About Half the Time
4. Fairly Often
5. Almost Always

10

When times are really difficult, I tend to be tough on myself.

1. Almost Never
2. Sometimes
3. About Half the Time
4. Fairly Often
5. Almost Always

11

I try to see my failings as part of the human condition.

1. Almost Never
2. Sometimes
3. About Half the Time
4. Fairly Often
5. Almost Always

12

I'm kind to myself when I'm experiencing suffering.

1. Almost Never
2. Sometimes

3. About Half the Time
4. Fairly Often
5. Almost Always

## HOW YOU RATE

### 1 to 2.5: Low in Self-Compassion

You're causing yourself unnecessary suffering by being so hard on yourself. "In general, ask if you would treat a friend the same way in a similar situation and try to give yourself the same warmth and support you'd show to a friend," says Kristin Neff, PhD.

### 2.5 to 3.5: Moderate in Self-Compassion

You're not mean to yourself but you could work on being supportive more consistently.

### 3.5 to 5: High in Self-Compassion

Keep being a good friend to yourself, especially when things are really difficult.

► This quiz originally appeared on *Greater Good*, the online magazine of the Greater Good Science Center at UC Berkeley at [greatergood.berkeley.edu](http://greatergood.berkeley.edu). For more information on the mental and physical health benefits of practicing self-compassion, visit [Neff's self-compassion.org](http://Neff's-self-compassion.org).



If you're worried about money, figuring out where you can spend less can help you feel more in control.

# CONQUER YOUR FEARS

From financial worries to FOMO, there are many different issues that can ignite your everyday anxiety. Experts show how to start tackling some of the most common causes.

| by Lindsey Emery |

**F**irst off, kudos to you for having the daily drill down: Rise, shine, conquer, and repeat. Still, we all experience pitfalls that can mess with our peace of mind. Pile of bills, anyone? The good news is that there are solid strategies and readily accessible support for the hot-button issues that trouble many of us from time to time. Read on for the tips, links, and motivation you need to move forward.

## TRIGGER Work and Money

► **Take One Step at a Time** “A lot of people have these extremely high, almost masochistic standards for success at work, and it makes us more vulnerable to feeling stressed when we don’t get everything done perfectly,” says Charmain Jackman, PhD, a Boston-based licensed psychologist and the founder and CEO of InnoPsych, Inc., an organization that aims to disrupt racial disparities in mental health. One strategy she shares is to stop packing your to-do list and instead, ask yourself, “What’s the one thing I can do today to make me feel successful?” “Identifying and focusing your attention on the one

thing that really needs to get done will clear your mind of the clutter and shift your energy in the right direction,” Jackman says.

## ► Adjust Your Expectations

“If you’re worried about money, take control and make changes. Figure out where you can spend less—perhaps with the help of a financial advisor—and don’t be afraid to talk openly about it. These ups and downs are simply a fact of life, and they won’t last forever,” says Andrew Rosen, PhD, founder and clinical director at The Center for Treatment of Anxiety & Mood Disorders in Delray Beach, Florida. “In our country, in particular, the model is to make as much money as possible and then spend it. So really, we never have enough money.” Remind yourself of what you need to be happy, rather than what you want, he suggests.

► **Avoid a Quick Fix** “Most paths to stress-free finances are found in a better understanding of how things work and implementing simple daily adjustments,” notes Rebecca Richardson, aka The Mortgage Mentor, a senior mortgage consultant based in Charlotte, North Carolina. She suggests first honing in on what your concern is—whether it’s budget-related, repairing credit or market

volatility—then enlisting a reputable financial advisor to map out a plan. Find one through The National Association of Personal Financial Advisors at [napfa.org](http://napfa.org).

## A FEW GO-TO OPTIONS

► **Contact your company’s human resources or benefits department.** “A lot of companies are tuning in to how they can improve their employees’ emotional well-being,” says Jackman. Reach out and see what resources are available for you.

► **Download the Shine app** ([theshineapp.com](http://theshineapp.com)) for some daily self-care and wellness advice from a support team that is 80% comprised of people of color, with a diverse range of experiences and skills.

## TRIGGER Your Relationship

► **Don’t Dissect—Reconnect** “We’re all a little angry and irritable and bored with each other right now. And while there’s normally a lot of therapeutic value in introspection, try giving yourself a break from analyzing everything about your relationship, like you’ve been doing over the last year and a half,” says Judy Kuriansky, PhD, a clinical psychologist



Avoid the blame game: Reframe irritations as a dialogue for future improvement.

and author of *The Complete Idiot's Guide to a Healthy Relationship*. Instead, she recommends you reconnect by making a list of things that you enjoy doing together and then, well, doing them. "Find activities that spark up your attraction to each other and boost your endorphins, like biking, hiking or listening to music."

► **Remember, You're on the Same Team** "We have ideas built up in our head about the way things should be, and when it's not that way, we often look for someone to fault or blame—which all too often ends up being our partners. "It's like when you're lost in the woods. In the beginning we realize it's much better to not be alone, but after a while, we start to turn on each other," says Rosen. Try to avoid the blame game, commit to joining forces, and you'll both come out feeling better.

► **Tell Them What You Need** No one is good at mind reading. "Frame what you need in the future when

an irritation comes up rather than yell at each other for something that already happened. For instance, say, "In the future, I'd appreciate it if you let me know you'll be home late," says psychologist Darcy Lockman, PhD, author of *All the Rage: Mothers, Fathers, and the Myth of Equal Partnership*. And delegate who does what during the week so there's no stressing about it.

► **Let It Out** "If you're really upset, you can't (and shouldn't) just bury those emotions. You need to let the steam out, or else it's going to boil over," notes Kuriansky. Still, don't start a shouting match. "Go into your room quietly, speak to your partner as if they were there, and let yourself get to the extreme of what you really want to say. You may find your anger is rooted in something else completely."

### THE POWER OF GRATITUDE

Research shows that when you take time to appreciate the things you've got, it gives you a more positive outlook. One study in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* revealed that people who regularly wrote about the things they were grateful for experienced a significant boost in their happiness and well-being. "Throughout the day, remind yourself of the little things that make life pretty good. It can be a subtle shift of thinking. For example, if you're running late to something, think, 'Well, at least I'm running!,'" says David Baron, DO, senior vice president of the Western University of Health Sciences. And kick off your morning mindset with three things you're looking forward to or grateful for that day—rather than ruminating on what you're dreading.

### A FEW GO-TO OPTIONS

- Find a licensed therapist through the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy at [aamft.org](http://aamft.org).
- Set up a couples therapy session with a licensed therapist through the Talkspace app ([talkspace.com](http://talkspace.com)), which is used by more than 1 million people.

### TRIGGER

#### Parenting Pressures

► **Keep an Open Dialogue** "In the words of our favorite, Mister Rogers,

'For feelings to be manageable, they have to be mentionable.' Make sure your kids have the vocabulary to communicate their feelings right now, so as their parents, you can reflect back and validate their emotions," says Jonathan Dalton, PhD, licensed psychologist and director of the Center for Anxiety and Behavioral Change in Rockville, Maryland. For example, say, "It seems like you're really stressed right now," and then give them an

opportunity to respond. And with teenagers, it's important for them to understand that you've struggled and overcome plenty of obstacles in your life, too. "Talking about hard times doesn't make you seem less perfect in your kids' eyes, it makes you more relatable and helps alleviate their anxiety about perfectionism," Dalton says.

#### ► Create Clear Boundaries

"Ultimately, our kids just want our time and attention. So it's really



Planning which family rituals you can do with your kids can help you designate other times you need solely for work or self-care.

important to create those boundaries between family time and work time, especially when you're working from home," says Jackman. Consider rituals you can do together that make it clear, like movie night, family dinners, game night, etc. Then talk to each other, ask questions and really use the time to connect. Dalton recommends asking your older kids leading questions, like, "What have you learned about yourself that you couldn't have known if we didn't go through this?" "If you can find meaning in your suffering, it helps to change the entire narrative," he says.

► **Take Care of Yourself, Too** "The best gift a parent can give kids right now is to model self-care. Prioritizing yourself and your health and well-being will teach your kids the importance of taking care of themselves, too," says Dalton, who notes that the rates of anxiety and depression have doubled for teenagers over the last year. They need to learn healthy coping strategies, and you can serve as a good example.

**A FEW GO-TO OPTIONS**

- Share the MyLife app with your kids for mindfulness tools you can all use to help address stress and anxiety, recommends Jackman.
- Download the In Love While Parenting app. "It provides

For longer stretches of calm, consider muting the notifications on your tech. Also, space out your check-ins so the news won't disrupt your thoughts as often.

both useful advice for you as an individual parent and healthy ways to co-parent together with your partner," says Jackman.

**TRIGGER**

**Social Media**

► **Check Yourself** "Understand what works for you and what doesn't. If seeing news all day triggers stress and/or you find yourself going down the rabbit hole and constantly losing time to social media, consider limiting your check-ins," recommends Jackman. If you're not quite ready to ditch it altogether, simply turn off your notifications and schedule two or three times when you can check your preferred social media, but set an alarm for five, 10 or 20 minutes, so you won't be on there longer than necessary.

► **Keep It in Perspective** "I like to call it 'facade-book,' because everyone is putting a false foot forward, and the data on Instagram is so bad for our body image and self-confidence," says Dalton. "Recognize that everyone is comparing their behind the scenes footage with other people's highlight reels, and so much suffering comes in that place between what is and what we think it should be."

► **Put Your Phone Away** "Make your bedroom a phone-free zone," recommends Jackman. "Scrolling through social media right before bed can keep your mind buzzing and make it hard to fall asleep." And checking the news or emails the second you wake up in the morning has its drawbacks as well. Instead, she suggests that you set an actual alarm clock, practice gratitude when you get up and wait to look at your phone until after you've made a cup of coffee.

**A FEW GO-TO OPTIONS**

- Download a meditation app, such as Calm (calm.com) or Headspace (headspace.com), for a more mindful bedtime ritual. Or unplug completely and take slow, deep breaths.



**THE VERDICT ON CBD**

There has been a boom in products containing cannabidiol, or CBD, a non-intoxicating component in cannabis and hemp that has been touted to produce a range of benefits including stress relief. But what does the science say? According to the National Institutes of Health's National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health (NCCIH): "A small amount of evidence from studies in people suggests that cannabis or cannabinoids might help to reduce anxiety. One study of 24 people with social anxiety disorder found that they had less anxiety in a simulated public speaking test after taking CBD than after taking a placebo." One review in the *Journal of the American Pharmacists Association* analyzed the results from eight different studies—all of which looked at how varying doses and applications of CBD affected anxiety levels in healthy adults—and concluded that it was a promising treatment with minimal adverse effects. But note: The Food and Drug Administration hasn't approved CBD for any medical use, and the quality and dosage can vary widely between products and manufacturers. The NCCIH adds that, as with any other complementary health approach, your first stop should be talking with your health care providers to see if CBD is right for you.

- Find a licensed therapist and helpful anxiety-reducing advice on GoodTherapy (goodtherapy.org).

**TRIGGER**

**Overwhelming Uncertainty**

► **Get Comfortable** "We all need to build a tolerance for uncertainty. When we're uncertain, we try to gain an illusion of certainty, and that's not always possible, especially now. We have to remind ourselves, 'I don't know, I can't know, and that makes me anxious, but that's OK,'" says Dalton. "Try prefacing a scary thought with, 'In this moment, I'm having a scary thought about...'" That will help ground you in 'what is' instead of 'what if.'"

► **Detox** "Research shows that when you regularly meditate or follow a mindfulness practice, it can bring significant improvements in your brain," says Rosen. He says he thinks of it like flossing your teeth—the more you do it, the more benefits you see. Start with just a few minutes when you wake up in the morning and before you close your eyes at night.

► **Establish Coping Strategies** "When plans don't work out—or you feel like you can't even make them—the grief that comes with that is real. Don't pretend you don't feel bad. Give yourself space for those emotions, and then have a plan to work your way through them," says Jackman. Make a

list of activities—journaling, exercise, needlepoint, etc.—that allow you to be present and alleviate anxiety and stress when it comes up.

**A FEW GO-TO OPTIONS**

- Discover the support and resources offered by Mental Health America at mhanational.org, suggests Jackman.
- Talk to a helpful professional at the National Alliance on Mental Illness (nami.org) through their HelpLine at (800) 950-6264.
- Get free mindfulness and meditation tools from the Healthy Minds Program app, created by a neuroscientist and scientist who've spent years studying the science of well-being.



**CAN ACUPUNCTURE HELP?**

Acupuncture, a practice that involves inserting thin needles into specific points on your body to help restore balance and improve energy flow, has long been used in traditional Chinese medicine to treat pain and improve well-being. And researchers have been studying whether it might help in the treatment of anxiety as well. But according to the National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health (NCCIH): "Although some studies of acupuncture for anxiety have had positive outcomes, in general, many of the studies on acupuncture for anxiety have been of poor methodological quality or not of statistical significance. In addition, because the research is extremely variable (e.g., number and variety of acupuncture points, frequency of sessions, and duration of treatment), it is difficult to draw firm conclusions about potential benefits." Search for a nearby practitioner through sites such as the American Society of Acupuncturists (asacu.org), although licensing credentials vary from state to state.



Feeling like you can't focus? Achieving better attention is a trainable skill.

# RECLAIM YOUR FOCUS

Even though we may feel under constant pressure to multitask, the brain is not wired to divide its attention that way. So what to do when your mind is racing?

| by Mary Anderson |

**Y**ou may have heard the expression “monkey mind,” and the Buddhist concept pretty well sums up the unsettled sensation of being overwhelmed by thoughts. That sort of distraction seems to have become the occupational hazard of our times. “We feel as if our plates are too full, especially nowadays,” says Adam Borland, PsyD, a psychologist at the Cleveland Clinic’s Center of Adult Behavioral Health in Ohio. “Given everything that’s going on in the world, plus the 24-hour news cycle and social media—on top of the general family- and work-related stress—it’s so difficult for people to turn off.” And when we reach the heightened state of juggling worries or tasks, it takes away from our ability to pay attention to details.

“Of all the mental skills that we could talk about, the ability to focus your mind is the most

important,” says Mark Aoyagi, PhD, a professor at the Graduate School of Professional Psychology at the University of Denver. “And where most people get stuck in unproductive or unhelpful ways of thinking is that at any one given point in time, your attention can only be at one place.” The truth is that we really can’t multitask, doing mental processing on two different fronts simultaneously. “What we can do is switch our attention very rapidly.

“Of all the mental skills that we could talk about, the ability to focus your mind is most important.”

— MARK AOYAGI, PHD

But that switching is not an effective way to use our attention,” he says. Indeed, one study in the *Journal of Experimental Psychology* found that toggling between tasks required more time and led to more errors.

“When we switch contexts there is an attentional residue that remains on the previous task,” Aoyagi explains. Fielding calls in the midst of writing, for instance, will force you to reorient yourself to what you were composing each time, often with the echoes of the phone conversation bouncing around in your mind. “Although rapidly switching between tasks may feel like we are getting more done, we are actually exhausting our attentional resources and, in the process, exhausting ourselves.”

## IMPROVING YOUR ABILITY TO CONCENTRATE

Essentially, there are different types of attentional styles: internal versus external, broad versus narrow, and

combinations therein. Shifting into the correct one is key for completing any given task. “Many tasks go through a progression,” says Aoyagi. You start with broad external focus—in which you assess what the situation is—then shift to broad internal where you gain a sense of your “physical/mental/emotional readiness” for the task at hand. Next, you shift to narrow internal focus as you develop a plan for how to execute the task based on the information you gathered from your external and internal scans. Finally, you shift to narrow external focus as you execute the plan. Much like a professional athlete, having a set warm-up ritual that begins with that broad focus and narrows to an intense singular focus can sharpen concentration when you need it. “The primary technique for focus is to have a routine,” says Aoyagi.

Once you’re focused on the task before you, stick with it until you’ve reached a designated spot. “Especially when we are pressed for time, it is important to focus our attention on a specific task or domain until we either finish the task or come to a chosen stopping point—as opposed to an imposed one such as an email or phone interruption,” says Aoyagi. “Then we focus our attention on the next task

with an attentional microbreak in between to reset and refocus.”

### TAKE A MENTAL LOAD OFF

There are times the daily juggle or a big project can seem too much to handle, but managing expectations can help guard against the negative thought patterns that only make concentrating harder. “Let’s imagine you’re holding five tennis balls in one hand and five tennis balls in the other hand, and you throw them all up in the air,” says Borland. “Is the expectation that you’re somehow going to catch all 10 of them? The reality is you’re not.” The idea is to view the one or two you do catch as an accomplishment rather than the eight that you didn’t as a fail.

Along the way, check in with yourself for signs that you need to take a break. “Sometimes we go on autopilot and we’re so geared toward putting our head down and working, that we don’t recognize how off-kilter the balance is,” Borland adds. “We forget that it’s important for us to give ourselves permission to slow down.”

The tips below can help you achieve a mental reset.

#### ► Think Small

Daunted by a large project? Organize your tasks on paper, suggests

Borland. “Make a list that breaks down what you need to get done into small, achievable goals,” he says. “View doing each of those sections as an accomplishment. Because if you view a goal from a macro level and you don’t achieve it, then it’s like those eight tennis balls dropping.”

#### ► Slow Down Your Racing Thoughts

Try this drill from the American Psychological Association: Mentally count backward by three from 100, as in 100, 97, 94, and so on. Per the APA, “focusing in a structured way and engaging your brain in a distracting task can disrupt unhelpful patterns.”

#### ► Off-Load Anxiety

When there is an upcoming meeting or test, writing down anything that has you worried beforehand can help clear your head of such emotional distractions. One study at the University of Chicago found that students who did so 10 minutes before taking an exam improved their scores. The researchers noted that this simple act freed up brainpower that would have otherwise been spent dealing with the pent-up worry.

#### ► Build in Some Mindful Breaks

“For people who sit for hours and hours in front of their computer, I suggest setting an alarm every so often to stand up and give your eyes a rest,” says Borland. Use the opportunity to do a body scan: Are your shoulders tensed up? Stretch and draw them down. “I think when we get into that autopilot setting, that’s where we miss those opportunities,” he says. You can even plan to incorporate mindfulness wherever you are to help refocus. “For example, every time you see a red light while driving—brake lights or a stop light—you can take a deep, conscious breath,” says Aoyagi.

#### ► Get Into a 90–20 Rhythm

“There is something called an ultradian rhythm that is derived from our biological rhythms throughout the day and night,” says Aoyagi. “Essentially, the ultradian rhythm is 90 minutes on, 20 minutes off—in other words, 90 minutes of focused work, 20 minutes of attentional rest.” Use this as your framework for breaking up your workload to refuel your focus at opportune intervals. And make that 20-minute reset count. “Social media is not attentional rest,” says Aoyagi. “The best rest is done outside, preferably in nature, and incorporates relaxing movement like walking.” Another perk of being outdoors is that it allows our eyes to focus on long distances versus close-up screens and walls.



Rather than try to multitask, hit one minigoal before moving on to the next.





Just as we are  
wired for survival,  
we are wired  
to persevere.

# BUILD YOUR RESILIENCE

Having the tools to help you bounce back from everyday stressors can make all the difference to your mental well-being. In this excerpt from her latest book, *Good Anxiety*, Wendy Suzuki, PhD, a neuroscientist at New York University, provides actionable steps to let worry roll off of you.

**M**anaging anxiety and ultimately transforming it for a different, better purpose comes down to resilience.

Resilience is the ability to adapt and recover from hardship in our lives. We need resilience every day to help us through the daily challenges, disappointments, real or perceived insults, or any situation that might feel painful. It's also one of the most important tools we have to draw from in the face of loss, sorrow or trauma. Traumatic events call upon us to survive; they pull on every last ounce of our strength and emotional and physical resources.

In other words, we rely on resilience all the time. And just as we are wired for survival, we are also wired for resilience.

As a scientist I think of resilience as successful adaptation and the ability to effectively respond to the stressors in our lives. And the good news is that in spite of the inevitability of these stressors—both big and small—we can learn to build

our resilience. We build resilience by learning how to think flexibly and accepting that we are not defined by our failures. We build resilience by acknowledging what we need and knowing when to ask for help. We also build resilience when we seek out pleasure and sources of enjoyment, from food to sports to sex. Yes, having fun helps build our stores of resilience!

When we challenge ourselves and grow more confident, we build our resilience. When we figure out how to dial down our body's

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In neurobiological terms, resilience is the outcome of how we manage stress each and every day and over our entire lifetime.”

—WENDY SUZUKI, PHD

stress response through relaxation techniques, we build our resilience. When we eat right, get enough sleep, and exercise, we boost our physical resilience, and in turn, support our psychological resilience. In essence, because our brain-bodies are wired to adapt, we can build resilience of brain, body and mind. When confronted with setbacks, failure or sadness, we can actively choose to find opportunities to optimize our stress response.

The true power of resilience is that it emanates from our own personal smorgasbord of both successes and failures as they gradually build over our entire lifetimes. Resilience also builds from leaning on our adaptive coping strategies, the ones we know and rely on to get us through those tough days and stressful situations when anxiety can hit. Actually, dear readers, with resilience we have come full circle to one of the most powerful abilities that everyday anxiety affords us: the power to build our own personal and replenishable source of resilience in our lives. Anxiety helps build up our resilience stores; anxiety also alerts us to the need for recovery and self-care. In neuroscience, we call it stress inoculation.

### DEVELOPING ACTIVE COPING STRATEGIES

Our first line of defense in managing any kind of stress is through coping strategies. These strategies offer us ways to measure our ability to manage stress; whether these

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My primary motivation for waking up every morning and doing my workout in my living room is that big fat, fluffy hippocampus that I want to build in my own brain.”

—WENDY SUZUKI, PHD

are adaptive (i.e., helpful) or maladaptive (harmful) says a lot about our resilience capacity. Some neurobiologists refer to our coping strategies in other ways, such as the contrasting active and passive coping responses. Active coping responses are “intentional efforts of the subject aimed at minimizing the physical, psychological or social harm of a stressor” and imply an attempt to gain “control” over the stressor. Passive coping, which refers to avoidance or “learned helplessness,” occurs when a person avoids a stressful situation but also avoids building resilience to the stressor. In such cases, the individual becomes more vulnerable or susceptible to the impact of stress and therefore is considered less resilient.

What the science of stress inoculation tells us is that we are

all born with tools to get ourselves out of the stress/anxiety-provoking situation. Just to be clear, all anxiety-provoking situations will engage your stress response, but the act of exercising those responses helps inoculate you from stress/anxiety responses in the future. It is as if you are teaching yourself that you CAN survive these situations and the better you get at first feeling that anxiety and then acting to mitigate the stress response, the better you will manage in the future. In a sense, this gives you the opportunity to retrain your stress response with every anxiety-provoking situation you encounter as long as you are aware of your options and tools to flip that bad anxiety response to a good one.

### SIGNS OF STRENGTH

Multiple studies have shown that we can actively build our resilience and sometimes even reverse deleterious effects of trauma on our stress system. Scientists continue to explore the negative impacts of prolonged stress; they are also looking at what is happening when people are able to avoid or resist the deleterious effects—essentially, what it takes for people to become more resilient in ways that protect the brain and overall health.

Indeed, in a review of the neuroscience of resilience studies, [clinical researcher] Gang Wu, PhD, and colleagues identified numerous characteristics that have been associated with people who show strong resilience. What’s particularly exciting is that most of these characteristics align with the anxiety superpowers.

**1 An Optimistic Outlook,** often referred to as having a positive affect, has been shown to reduce negative mood and anxiety and quickens recovery from traumatic events. Although I’m not



Facing an anxiety-producing challenge and conquering it inoculates you from the stress response in the future.

### A ONE-STEP STRESS INOCULATION DRILL

Those everyday stressors that are solvable—managing the morning pre-work sprint, juggling the household to-dos—are actually good for you. The bottom line: They make you more resilient to stress. Rather than view every stressor that you go through during the day, as, “Oh no, it’s another stressor,” think instead, “Ah, I got through that. Am I intact? Am I still upright? That means I’m that much more resilient.” Every time you remind yourself of that, you are building up your stress inoculation.



### PUMP UP YOUR BRAIN TO PROTECT YOUR MEMORY

The hippocampus is the brain structure critical to our ability to form and retain new memories of facts and events and is one of the most vulnerable structures in aging and dementia, including Alzheimer's disease. Not only does prolonged stress affect your ability to form and retain new long-term memories but it can literally start to damage the cells of the hippocampus, making them shrink and thereby more vulnerable to age-related cognitive decline. We now have data on how much exercise can help your hippocampus be more resilient: For people who are just starting their exercise journey (those who do so less than 30 minutes a week), we found that doing 45 minutes of aerobic activities two to three times a week is a significantly effective dose for seeing improvements in the function of the hippocampus. And the more you do above that—going from two to three aerobic workouts a week to four, five or more—our studies are showing you can get significant improvements. In fact, my primary motivation for waking up every morning and doing my workout in my living room is that big fat, fluffy hippocampus that I want to build in my own brain.

An optimistic outlook has been shown to reduce negative mood and anxiety.



suggesting you can generate an optimistic outlook out of thin air, we do know that it can be developed over time. Studies have shown how an optimistic attitude goes hand in hand with overall well-being, good physical health, and having a strong social network.

**2 Cognitive Flexibility** and reappraisal, two fundamental aspects of emotion regulation, can also be learned, practiced, and ultimately used as a form of psychological resilience. Cognitive flexibility enables us to recruit our attention, refocus, and resist internalizing failures as indications of who we are. This cognitive nimbleness helps pivot your anxiety and becomes a form of psychological resilience.

**3 Social Support**, which entails seeking out loving or caring relationships to help buffer the impact of stress, is indeed a superpower of anxiety. The importance of our relationships, ability to empathize, and ultimately show compassion buffer against anxiety; this very buffer is a form of resilience.

**4 Humor** has been shown to be an active way to lessen anxiety and tension brought on by stress and has been shown to help people build both physical and psychological resilience.

**5 Physical Exercise** not only improves our overall health and brain-body functioning but also acts as a source of physiological resilience, helping us manage stress both physically and psychologically.

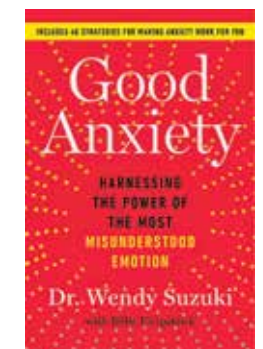
**6 Altruism**, or what scientists refer to as “prosocial behavior,” has been shown to promote recovery from trauma. I see this resilience booster as an extension of the superpower of compassion, which helps us fuel a stronger connection to our fellow human beings and goes a long way to offsetting anxiety and making us more emotionally resilient.

**7 Mindfulness** as a conscious practice, including meditation and yoga, and other mindful activities, has been shown to reduce passive or avoidant coping, such as reliance on alcohol, in response to stress. In this way, a mindfulness practice is like a prophylactic against

anxiety and depression and in turn builds psychological resilience. Stress is not only an inevitable fact of our lives but also something we are designed to deal with; in fact, stress is what forces us to adapt, learn, and evolve, both as individuals and a species. The cliché is true: all of the most important life lessons come from the challenges we face and how we deal with them. The key point here is that resilience comes not only from the confidence and self-belief that we gain from the successes in our lives but perhaps more importantly from surviving, adjusting, and moving on after the inevitable failures and challenges. It takes both sides of this equation to build our superpower of resilience. We need to go through hard things in order to know we can survive them.

### SO, WHAT IS RESILIENCE?

- ▶ It's tenacity in response to falling short of your goal.
- ▶ It's courage to continue despite disappointment.
- ▶ It's the belief that you can and will do better if you put in the effort or practice.
- ▶ It's the confidence to believe that you matter. It's an openness to learning and relearning. It's the stamina to persevere.



From *Good Anxiety* by Wendy Suzuki, PhD, with Billie Fitzpatrick. Copyright © 2021 by Wendy Suzuki, PhD. Reprinted by permission of Atria Books, a division of Simon & Schuster, Inc.

Any environment is ripe for creating a mindful moment.

# THE ART OF MINDFULNESS

With so many accessible practices that have the ability to cue calm, instant stress relief is more readily reachable than you may think.

| by Mary Anderson |

**T**here is a point at the end of almost every yoga class where the instructor asks us to lie still on the mat in Savasana, to quiet our thoughts and let the mental decompression sink in. If you're like me, you might use that time occasionally to run through your game plan for getting out of the locker room and on with the day. Maybe it's a missed opportunity to soak up a moment of mindfulness—and yet there will be others. The truth is that there's nothing magical about a dimly-lit studio that unlocks our ability to focus within, any more than the downtown train ride home negates it.

“Mindfulness is really about what we would call radical acceptance of the present moment, which means that you're just letting go of anything else.”

— PETER ECONOMOU, PHD

“If you're on a subway and it's really loud, that is actually a great time to practice because no environment is completely perfect,” says Peter Economou, PhD, a psychology professor at Rutgers University in New Jersey and author of *Mindfulness Workbook for Beginners*. “The cool thing about mindfulness is that it's super accessible and it could be done anywhere.” In other words, there's no right or wrong way to reach a mindful state.

## DEMISTIFYING THE STATE OF AWARENESS

Meditation as a mental exercise can seem like a tall order for some, but it needn't be. The American

Psychological Association breaks the practice down as training your attention to achieve a state of calm concentration and positive emotions. Mindfulness, in turn, is simply a popular meditation technique that centers on focusing on the present moment and doing so without judgment. “Mindfulness is the process of being aware,” says Susana Galle, PhD, director of The Body-Mind Center in Washington, D.C. One always-available object to train our thoughts onto are our own selves. “When you observe yourself, you have a focus of attention,” she says. “And when you’re present, much of anxiety evaporates.”

### HOW IT WORKS TO REDUCE STRESS

The act of filtering our thoughts can apply the brakes to the stress response. “What happens when you focus is that it correlates with the release of dopamine,” says Galle, referencing the feel-good brain chemical that increases concentration as well as bliss. “Meanwhile the release of cortisol is being moderated.” The result is that you feel calmer in the moment. Over time, practicing mindfulness can help the brain itself learn to better process incoming stress signals.

In a recent review in the journal *Psychosomatic Medicine*, researchers at Carnegie Mellon University and the University of Pittsburgh described how mindfulness practices can actually train two pathways in the brain that largely dictate the body’s resilience to stress: Increasing the activity and connectivity in the prefrontal cortex to help it better regulate emotions; and decreasing the reactivity of the brain’s “stress alarm system.” Indeed, their own study of stressed, unemployed adults found that those who completed a three-day mindfulness retreat showed better connectivity between

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When you observe yourself, you have a focus of attention. Much of anxiety evaporates.”

— SUSANA GALLE, PHD

the prefrontal cortex and the region referred to as the “resting brain,” whereas those who attended a relaxation retreat did not.

“We don’t have much data on whether small doses of mindfulness training can reliably change these stress resilience pathways, but some initial studies suggest that even just three days—of 20 minutes per day—can change how the brain responds to pain, suggesting that short doses are helpful,” says study co-author David Creswell, PhD, a professor of psychology at Carnegie Mellon.

Here are several activities that can help you be mindful throughout the day. Do whichever feels best for you.

### BREATHE DEEPLY

Focusing on your breath has a twofold effect: It draws your attention to the moment and also provides an opportunity to adjust your respiration rate to produce a calming effect. “Pay attention to the breath and willfully make the breath a certain length, such as four counts in and four counts out,” says Galle. “It’s a focusing process for you to come back to the present, come back to your breath, and take a time-out.” Put your left hand on your abdomen and your right hand on your chest as you inhale and exhale. Next, breathe in deeply for three counts and take a slow exhale for five counts. Continue taking longer exhales than inhales and the body will naturally remain in rest and digest mode.

### GET GROUNDED

“Wherever you are in the world or whatever you’re doing, or however you’re feeling at any given time, just bringing yourself back to your feet provides a reminder of the present moment,” says Economou. And you don’t have to be barefoot in contact with nature to benefit—being able to come back to the moment is the goal of this mindfulness technique. “If you are doing it with sneakers on, try to notice the sock around your foot and the foot on the shoe, and then the shoe is on the earth.”

### CHOOSE A MANTRA

Having a word or phrase that evokes a sense of calm can help you get into a mindful state. The word “peace,” for example, can remind you of a peaceful scene. “You can imagine a beautiful bird or your favorite place,” says Galle. Indeed, you can use all your senses to home in on the experience. “It can be a soft, velvety texture, the smell of flowers or a certain taste that just shifts your mental state,” she says.

### HELPFUL TECH

- ▶ The UCLA Mindful App ([uclahealth.org](http://uclahealth.org)) includes a range of meditations that are part of UCLA’s Mindful Awareness Practices (MAPs) program, which has been shown in studies to reduce stress.
- ▶ Fitness trackers such as Fitbit and the Apple Watch offer guided breathing sessions with visual cues showing you how long to inhale and exhale.
- ▶ You can set your smartphone, Google Assistant or Alexa to remind you to periodically take a mindful break of your choice.

When you feel your mind wandering, acknowledge it and bring your attention back to the present.



Mindfulness practices can train two pathways in the brain that largely dictate resilience to stress.

### FOCUS ON EVERYDAY ACTIVITIES

“One really accessible practice is mindful cooking,” says Economou. “Rather than thinking about a fight that you had or an issue at work, just peel the potatoes.” Concentrating on such a simple task is a way to tune out other worries and be present. “And there are so many other opportunities. It could be an art project; it could be puzzles. It could be a mindful conversation, which means putting devices away and actually just listening and just being with somebody as they’re speaking,” he says.

### CHECK IN DURING YOUR YOGA FLOW

“It’s easy to go through the motions of yoga, but to enhance the mindfulness component of this practice, simply keep

bringing your attention back to your awareness in your body,” says Tiffany Cruikshank, LAc, MAOM, founder of Yoga Medicine, a community of expert yoga teachers focused on fusing the best of anatomy and Western medicine with the traditional practice of yoga. “Similar to a meditation practice, when you notice your mind wandering off, acknowledge it and bring your attention back to the sensations and breath awareness in your body at the present moment.”

### PICTURE RELAXING HEAD TO TOE

Consciously scanning your body and imagining each part releasing tension increases self-awareness and provides stress relief. It can be as simple as imagining you are slowly submerging into warm water. “You’re going to find there is a wave

of relaxation,” says Galle. “When you’re in the fight-or-flight state, all the blood goes to the central organs. When you relax, the natural physiology of the body is to improve the circulation to the distal parts, which are the hands and the feet.

Guide your thoughts to cue a feeling of heaviness and warmth in a clockwise direction: My right arm is heavy. Then my right leg is heavy. My left leg is heavy. Then my left arm is heavy and my whole left side is heavy. And then my shoulders and neck become heavy. As you observe the sensations, the physiology may change,” says Galle. “You program yourself to feel that tingling because when there is a warming effect, there can be a tingling sensation in the fingertips and the tips of your toes.” You may find this is a particularly useful technique to help you relax at bedtime.

## SIX-MINUTE STRESS-RELIEF BREAK

“Use this as a tool to help guide your body and mind into a more relaxed state anytime you need it,” says yoga instructor Tiffany Cruikshank of the restorative poses she suggests here. “It focuses specifically on training your body to relax—and, just like a muscle, the relaxation response is something that needs to be practiced.”

#### Supine Moon Pose

Begin by lying on your back with your arms overhead. Slightly walk your feet a few inches to the left, keeping both hips on the floor. Cross your ankles there. Then walk your arms slightly to the left as well and grab your right wrist with your left hand. Stay for one minute, then slowly walk your arms and legs over to the other side and repeat. “Traditional Chinese medicine sees the liver and gallbladder as our main stress-regulating organs,” says Cruikshank. “The idea is that when our energy can flow freely through the gallbladder meridian, which runs through our sides, our body is able to heal, repair and regulate stress better.”

#### Supine Twist

Begin by lying on your right side with your hip and pelvis on a folded towel. Then bring your left arm out to the left for a gentle twist. Stay for one minute and visualize your lower back melting toward the floor. Switch sides and repeat. “One of the most common symptoms associated with stress is low back discomfort. This pose helps ease the lower back to guide you into a deeper state of relaxation,” says Cruikshank.

#### Upper Back Roll

Roll up a towel to be about 2 inches in diameter. Lie down with the roll across your mid back, around where you would wear

a heart rate monitor. Stretch your arms out to the sides or up overhead; arms can be straight or bent like a cactus. (Legs can be bent with your feet on the floor or stretched out straight on the floor.) Stay for two minutes, relaxing a little more with each exhale. “This pose helps to revive the upper back and is also used as a calming pose,” says Cruikshank. “In traditional Chinese medicine, the heart meridian runs through the inner arms and is responsible for regulating anxiety and our circadian rhythm for a deep and restorative sleep. For these reasons, this pose makes for a great end of day transition to calm and release the upper back.”



PART THREE

# YOUR ULTIMATE DE-STRESS PLAN

Tension happens. These simple, everyday tactics will not only help you cope but also thrive.



Taking longer exhales than inhales will send your body the message to relax.

# INHALE, EXHALE

You can use your breath not only to cue a sense of calm during tense times but also to improve your overall health. Here's how.

| by MARY ANDERSON |

**S**ome time ago, I was moderating a panel discussion on the benefits of fitness trackers and I asked the experts to reveal which metrics they were personally keeping an eye on for their own health. The most common answer? Heart rate variability. It may not be on your radar yet, but improving this measure of your body's resilience to stress can have a transformative effect on your everyday well-being.

"When we're going through life, we're going to inevitably face certain challenges, and what's going to happen in response to each challenge is our heart rate is going to increase," explains Arielle Schwartz, PhD, a clinical psychologist in Colorado. "And when the challenge is over—maybe you had to slam on your brakes to avoid hitting the car in front of you that stopped suddenly—how quickly does your heart rate come back to a resting rate?" In a nutshell, heart rate variability is a sign of how efficiently your body recovers after

any given demand, and it hinges on the mix of oxygen and carbon dioxide in the lungs (more on that later). But you don't need a wrist tracker to employ one great way to optimize your heart rate variability: You can simply do that with every breath you take.

## CHECK IN WITH YOUR BREATH

Each time you inhale, the sympathetic nervous system (aka fight-or-flight mode) kicks in just a little and the heart rate speeds up a bit. When you exhale,

"The question is, 'How do I actually give a little bit of tone to my vagus nerve so that I can move between those different states efficiently and not get stuck in one mode?'" That's where intentionally adjusting your breathing comes in.

It's when the way and rate at which we regularly breathe switches us to what Schwartz calls a "sympathetically dominant" pattern or "reverse breathing" that the body idles in fight-or-flight mode and we may not even realize it. "The perceptibility of that added stress is diminished because we're living

6  
Breaths  
Per  
Minute

The most effective baseline respiration rate, according to what studies have shown

your parasympathetic nervous system (rest and digest) switches on and your heart rate should slow down a little. "Basically, every inhale is associated with a sympathetic pattern and every exhale is associated with the parasympathetic," says Schwartz.

inside of a chronic state of everyday stress," she says. "It's like, if you chronically tense a muscle, you lose awareness that you're tensing the muscle. So we've lost awareness of the impact of reverse breathing."

The telltale signs that you may be defaulting to this pattern, too? With

reverse breathing, also referred to as vertical or chest breathing, you take shorter, quicker breaths that seem to expand the chest versus slower breaths that expand the belly.

## HOW TO BREATHE EASIER

First of all, it's a safe bet to say you could benefit from breathing a little slower right now. "On average, people breathe between nine and 24 breaths per minute," says Natalie Christine Dattilo, PhD, a clinical psychologist and an instructor at Harvard Medical School. While Dattilo notes that a respiration rate of 24 breaths per minute is pretty high, even nine is shy of the mark at which the gas exchange taking place within your lungs is at

optimal efficiency. "To get the best balance between oxygen and carbon dioxide, the studies show that the most effective respiration rate is six breaths per minute," she says. "Luckily, you can train yourself to lower your baseline respiration rate, which does have positive impact on your resting respiration rate, your resting heart rate and your heart rate variability."

To reach the six breaths per minute ideal, think about breaking it down into 10 seconds per breath. That could be five seconds in, five seconds out, or four seconds in, six seconds out. Or a four-second inhale with a pause and then a four-second exhale. "Whatever is comfortable for you," says Dattilo. Imagine a sine wave cresting and falling to picture your

breathing. Or, yes, there's an app for that if you need a visual cue. The Calm app ([get.calm.com](http://get.calm.com)) and Insight Timer app ([insighttimer.com](http://insighttimer.com)) both show images of balloons expanding and then deflating so you can sync up your breath.

The beauty of following this rule of thumb is that it benefits your heart rate variability whether or not you have yet mastered breathing more from your belly, so to speak. "It was easier for people in my work to teach them how to breathe slowly than to breathe deeply," says Dattilo.

Still, you can work on the deep, or diaphragmatic, breathing part of the equation as you sit at your desk. Simply place one hand atop your belly, below the diaphragm: Picture this

key breathing muscle as the partition between the chest and abdominal cavity. Breathe so that you feel the belly significantly expand. (See "How Diaphragmatic is Your Breathing?" sidebar for specifics). "Obviously, the belly is not filling with air—you're filling your lower lungs and your diaphragm is descending as it should," says Schwartz. "But building somatic awareness becomes the key to facilitating lasting change."

## DO THIS RESET WHEN STRESS STRIKES

Just take a deep breath. We're so used to hearing this advice in a moment of anxiety but may not realize the nuance or science behind it.

"If you're changing the breath rate, your vagus nerve is going to pay attention," explains Schwartz. "It's going to get information and take that information back up to the brain." Just by taking a longer exhale than your inhale or switching to a more diaphragmatic breathing pattern is going to facilitate a parasympathetic response, essentially signaling rest and digest mode.

A good breathing ratio to remember for counteracting tension is one-to-two: Make your exhale twice as long as your inhale. But if you need a greater assist in taming your anxiety, try the technique that is known as the straw breath, says Schwartz. Inhale as you normally would and then exhale through your mouth for a count of 10, pursing your lips a bit to give a little resistance to your exhale. (You can also take the last two counts of exhale through the nose.) She recommends doing three straw breaths whenever the need arises or simply as a regular reset during the day. "You should feel something shift mentally and emotionally afterward," says Schwartz. "If you're stressed, set a reminder on your phone to do these three straw breaths every 12 minutes or so."



Pushing your pace for short bursts can increase your heart-lung fitness.

## EXPAND YOUR CARDIO CAPACITY

When you have better cardiorespiratory fitness, everything feels easier, from running errands to, well, running. How can you boost yours? Pushing yourself by adding faster-paced intervals when you exercise helps. According to the American College of Sports Medicine's (ACSM) latest exercise guidelines, there isn't a one-size-fits-all intensity to hit for those bursts since a lot depends on your fitness level. Still, the ACSM notes that 70 to 80% of maximum effort "seemed to provide a sufficient stimulus in moderately trained athletes" to elicit an improvement, while highly trained types may need to do all-out sprints.



With each inhale, you want to feel your belly expand more than your chest does.

## HOW DIAPHRAGMATIC IS YOUR BREATHING?

"If you feel like you get taller when you inhale or your chest puffs up, you are most likely taking a so-called 'vertical breath,' which means it is driven by secondary breathing muscles," says psychologist Belisa Vranich, PhD, author of *Breathing for Warriors*. Try her test to see where your diaphragmatic, or "horizontal," breathing zone is: Wrap a tape measure around your middle (just below your bottom rib but above the belly button) and measure there during an exhale and on an inhale. Be sure to stand and breathe without moving your shoulders.

- ▶ If your exhale measurement is 20 inches or greater, your inhale should exceed it by at least 2 inches. (In other words, if your inhale and exhale are in the 20s, there should be a difference of 2–3 inches between them.)
- ▶ If your exhale measurement is 30 inches or greater, your inhale should exceed it by at least 3 inches. (In other words, there should be 3–4 inches of difference between measurements.)
- ▶ If your exhale measurement is 40 inches or greater, your inhale should exceed it by at least 4 inches. (In other words, there should be about 4 inches between measurements.)



Stress makes us  
crave sugary,  
high-fat foods.

# NOURISH YOUR BRAIN

When the going gets tough, even the tough may get snacking. Try these tactics to take control of anxious eating—and your overall health.

| by **Mary Anderson** |

**D**uring the peak of quarantine, the breakout stars on Instagram were banana bread and loaves of sourdough. Headlines marveled at the recent spike in snack food sales. On the sitcoms we rewatched for escapism, bad breakups were washed down with pints of ice cream and all-nighters were fueled with bags of chips. All of which is to say that in both life and art, stress can often lead to emotional eating whereby we reach for comfort foods. “Essentially the chemical effects of cortisol will make you feel hungry,” says Laurel Mellin, PhD, author of *The Stress Eating Solution* and an associate professor emeritus of family and community medicine and pediatrics at the University of California, San Francisco. “There is something called the stress eating triangle, which is a triangle of structures in the brain: the amygdala, the reward center and the hypothalamus (or the appetite center). And when the stress response is activated, those three different structures cause a chemical reaction that makes us have strong desires to eat sugary, fatty foods.”

There can also be another emotional component to the foods that soothe us. “If your mother made you macaroni and cheese when you were sick, you would tend to crave macaroni and cheese when you’re in a place where you feel down or stressed,” says Amy Goodson, RD, a dietitian in the Dallas-Fort Worth area. “When someone is tired and worn out, no one looks for broccoli. They are looking for something salty or sweet or creamy because the fat in those types of foods is going to help you feel more satisfied in the moment.”

That sense of reward that comes from eating foods that are high in carbohydrates is due partly to the fact that carbs assist in the body’s

production of serotonin, a neurotransmitter that helps you feel calm. Indeed, the primary area of the body that produces this feel-good neurotransmitter is in the gut. “Basically, serotonin helps relay calming messages to your brain,” says Goodson.

So, given our emotional inclinations and internal workings, how do we resist the siren song of chocolate when we’re under stress? “The key is setting yourself up to be able to manage those stressful situations without looking to junk food,” says Goodson. Try these strategies to help.

### PRIME YOURSELF AGAINST SPLURGES

Nutrition experts talk about the importance of keeping your blood sugar levels stable throughout the day for sustained energy, and that also serves as a protection against stress eating. “Mental fatigue is often simply caused by blood sugar spikes and drops,” says Goodson. “If your blood sugar is low, it typically causes a decrease in mental acuity.

“  
The key is  
setting yourself  
up to be able  
to manage  
stressful  
situations  
without looking  
to junk food.”

— AMY GOODSON, RD

You feel physically tired. You might have a headache.” And adding stress to the equation only amplifies the urge for sugary carbs.

The stress hormone cortisol has an inverse relationship to insulin, the hormone that helps us metabolize carbohydrates and regulates blood sugar levels. That means that when cortisol levels remain elevated, insulin levels decrease, which can signal the body to crave carbs. If you’re stressed and your blood sugar is already low, it’s going to further

### STRESS-TEST YOUR CRAVINGS

“Getting in touch with actual physical hunger is an important part of your eating life. It helps you know when to eat and how much to eat based on your own body,” says dietitian Dawn Jackson Blatner, RD, author of *The Superfood Swap*. The best way to do that, she says, is to ask yourself the following questions:

▶ **Do I feel any physical sensations of hunger?**

(Those include stomach growling, trouble focusing, low energy, empty feeling in stomach, extra saliva in mouth.)

▶ **Do I feel any “tense-tired” emotions that may be pretending like they are hunger?**

(Being tense can include feeling stressed, flustered or overwhelmed. Tired encompasses feeling bored or lonely, or simply procrastinating.)

“If you feel the physical sensations, it’s time to eat,” says Jackson Blatner. “And be sure it’s undistracted, eating from a plate, sitting at a table so you can really tune in.” On the other hand, if you feel the tense-tired emotions, “it’s time to take an adult time-out,” she says. Refer to your Plan B list of healthier releases.



Fuel your body with healthy options at mealtimes to keep your blood sugar levels steady.

Time to eat? Make sure you are seated and undistracted so you can tune in to your plate.



prompt you to eat. “On the other hand, if your body is well fueled, and in turn you feel like you have energy, handling life’s stressors tends to be a little bit easier,” says Goodson. The best way to both fend off the mental fatigue that you might read as tension and also to be better able to resist an urge for quick carbs under stress, she says, “is to eat often and eat a high-fiber carbohydrate with a protein.” Apple slices and peanut butter is a good example.

“Even better, foods that are higher in fiber and lower in saturated fat have more nutrients than sugary snacks by default and they help manage inflammation in the body,” Goodson explains.

**TAKE A PAUSE TO DO A MENTAL SHIFT**

As you get the urge to reach for the nearest tempting treat, acknowledge the cause of your craving. “Stop and say to yourself,

‘It’s not me, it’s just stress,’” advises Mellin. Next, guide yourself toward a more positive frame of mind. “Process your emotions—don’t think your way out of it,” says Mellin, who calls the approach emotional brain training. Address the negative emotions and then think about reasons to feel positive, grateful, happy and secure. “That’s when the chemical shift happens,” she says. “When you’re able to look at the snack and think, I don’t even have any desire for it, then you’ve been successful.”

**MAKE SURE YOU HAVE A PLAN B**

Rather than struggle to distract yourself from stress eating in the moment, ready a list of go-to alternatives that you can rely on to diffuse the urge. “Try to make a plan in advance of a stressful situation, when you feel good and life is great,” says Goodson. She suggests thinking of three things that you can do in place of eating. If you love to read, pick up your favorite book. Do you get comfort from talking to someone? Know the top three people that you can call. Or simply go for a walk. “For a lot of people, getting out of the situation— actually removing themselves from the kitchen—can do the trick,” she says.

**REDUCE YOUR TEMPTATIONS**

Common sense will tell you that having easy access to your favorite snack can make it harder to resist when you’re under stress. “If certain foods are triggers to you to overeat and you are in a stressful time or season, don’t keep those foods in abundance at your house or office,” says Goodson. “Overeating can be due to the accessibility of food.” Even if you end up giving in to the urge to snack, you’ll increase the likelihood of grabbing a healthier option than that tub of rocky road.

**43.5%** of adults in a 7,753-person survey reported a rise in unhealthy snacking during the pandemic



Pepper slices make a satisfying swap for crunchy snacks without the fat.

**BETTER BITES**

When you have a specific hankering, reach for these healthier suggestions from dietician Dawn Jackson Blatner. “There are lots of great flavors here that will help hit the spot,” she says.

► **For Crunch**

Try roasted chickpeas or fresh pepper slices dipped in guacamole.

► **For Creaminess**

Stir unsweetened cocoa powder into plain 2% yogurt and top it with berries for a healthy chocolate mousse. Or if you have a banana ice cream maker try varieties like peanut butter-strawberry, chocolate coconut, and mint cacao nib.

► **For Sweetness**

Eat a handful of dates with a spoon of almond butter or have unsweetened dried mango slices. You can also make dark chocolate bark topped with chopped nuts.

► **For Saltiness**

Make a personal size olive-cheese-veggie board or lazy sushi: Top snack seaweed with avocado, cucumber, salmon and sriracha.



The mood uplift of the exercise high is real—and the benefits go way beyond endorphins.

# THE MENTAL MAGIC OF EXERCISE

It is one of the most potent ways to improve your energy and your mood, and you may be surprised at how little movement it takes to make a big impact.

| by **Mary Anderson** |

**T**here may be no cure-all prescription akin to “Put some Windex on it” in the real world, but surely the closest is this: Get some exercise. (Whether you’ve seen *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* or simply the memes, don’t try the aforementioned dad tactic at home.) Physical activity is linked to such a mind-boggling number of health benefits—it lowers blood pressure, enhances insulin sensitivity, and decreases the risk of heart disease, stroke, Type 2 diabetes and cancer, just to name a few—it’s no wonder experts regard it as medicine.

And there are the equally incredible mental boosts, as the American College of Sports Medicine enumerates in its official recommendations: “Prevention of and improvement in mild to moderate depressive disorders and anxiety can occur with exercise. A physically active lifestyle enhances feelings of ‘energy,’ well-being, quality of life, and cognitive function...”

So how exactly does exercise produce such an uplift? Let us count the ways.

## WHILE YOU WORK OUT

It seems odd—for something that feels so clear-your-head, recharge-your-batteries good—but exercise itself triggers the body’s stress response. As you work out, an alphabet soup of stress hormones circulates at higher levels in your body, including epinephrine (aka adrenaline), norepinephrine, adrenocorticotropic hormone (ACTH) and cortisol. The more intensely you go, the more they increase. But those quickly subside after you towel off. In fact, the more consistently you exercise, the magnitude of

150  
Minutes

Recommended  
minimum  
of moderate-  
intensity  
exercise to fit in  
each week—or  
75 minutes of  
vigorous exercise

Source: American College  
of Sports Medicine

that stress response lessens. “Biological responses to regular physical activity cause the body to gradually adapt to the muscular, cardiorespiratory and brain-based physiological stressors induced by each exercise bout,” explains Patrick O’Connor, PhD, a professor in the department of kinesiology at the University of Georgia and a Fellow at the American College of Sports Medicine. Essentially, you’re training your body to better deal with stress—and even small jaunts add up. “As little as 10 minutes of physical activity can activate and modulate brain neural circuits and ultimately contribute to greater resilience to stress and feelings of calmness, especially among people who are feeling stressed,” says O’Connor.

### THAT FEEL-GOOD HIGH

Though endorphins used to get the credit, the ability of exercise to produce that stress relief and mood boost is tough to pin to one particular pathway and likely due to a number of brain chemicals and other substances in the body. For instance, a study at Boston University School of Medicine found that levels of the neurotransmitter gamma-aminobutyric acid (GABA) increased

Doing fast-paced repetitions of body-weight exercises produces feelings of increased energy.



## ENERGIZING MINICIRCUIT

A towel is all you will need for this fast-paced living room routine from trainer Mary Onyango, a group fitness instructor at Equinox gym in New York City. “This cardio-strength workout consists of three blocks of four moves each,” she says. “Do as many repetitions of each move as you can for 45 seconds, rest for 15 seconds, then go on to the next move.” After you’ve finished with one block, rest one minute and move on to the next block. The entire circuit should take about 15 minutes.

If you want to go for a second round, rest for 30 seconds, then do each move for 30 seconds.

### BLOCK 1

#### 1 Standing Knee Tuck

Stand tall, holding the ends of a rolled-up hand towel with both hands in front of you. Bring left knee into chest, looping towel under bent knee. Bring towel back to start as you lower left foot to floor. Repeat with right knee, alternating sides for 45 seconds.

#### 2 Sumo Squat + Overhead Reach

Stand with feet wide, toes turned out slightly, holding the ends of a rolled-up hand towel with both hands in front of you. Lower into a squat as you lift arms directly overhead. Quickly return to start and repeat for 45 seconds.

#### 3 Side Lunge Twist

Stand tall, holding the ends of a rolled-up hand towel in front of you. Step left foot out to the side and bend left knee to lower into a side lunge, toes pointing forward, as you twist torso toward left with arms holding towel in front of chest. Return to start and repeat with right leg, twisting right. Alternate legs for 45 seconds.

#### 4 Superman Press-Up

Lie facedown on the floor with arms extended in front of you, holding the ends of the towel. Lift arms, chest and legs off the floor and lower. Slide towel back until palms are under shoulders, fingers spread, and do a pushup. Return to start and repeat. Continue for 45 seconds.

### BLOCK 2

#### 1 Hamstring Curl

Lie faceup on the floor with heels resting on top of a hand towel, on a wooden or uncarpeted floor. Quickly bring your heels toward you, as you lift your hips and bend your knees into a bridge position. Return to the start and continue alternating for 45 seconds.

#### 2 Single-Leg Balance on Left Leg

Stand tall and bring right knee to chest, looping towel under right foot while holding ends in both hands. Bring right knee out to side and then back to center. Continue for 45 seconds.

#### 3 Single-Leg Balance on Right Leg

Stand tall and bring left knee to chest, looping the towel under your left foot and holding ends in both hands. Bring left knee out to side and then back to center. Continue for 45 seconds.

#### 4 Skater Hops

Stand tall holding the towel in front of you. With towel in front of you throughout, hop out to left side, landing on left foot, slightly hinging forward at hips, as you swing right leg behind you to touch toes to floor. Return to start by swinging right leg out to hop right. Land on right leg, hinging at hips, as you sweep left leg behind right. Continue alternating legs for 45 seconds.

### BLOCK 3

#### 1 Double Crunch

Lie faceup on floor with knees bent, holding a towel in both hands directly above chest. Simultaneously extend arms behind head as you extend legs forward so feet hover off floor. Then crunch up, bringing knees toward chest and arms forward so that towel hugs knees. Return to extended position and repeat. Continue for 45 seconds.

#### 2 Bicycle Twist

Lie faceup on floor with knees bent, holding a towel in both hands directly above chest. Extend left leg forward and bring right knee to chest as you crunch up, twisting torso toward right. Return to start and repeat toward left, bringing left knee in. Continue alternating for 45 seconds.

#### 3 Superman Lat Pull

Lie facedown on the floor with arms extended in front of you, holding the ends of a towel taut. As you grasp the towel, lift arms, chest and legs off the floor. Bring shoulder blades down as you bend your elbows out to sides like a goalpost. Return to start and continue for 45 seconds.

#### 4 Plank Slide

Start in plank position—balancing on palms and toes as if at the top of a pushup—with towel under toes. Keep upper body still and bring knees in toward your chest by sliding towel in with your toes. Return to start and repeat. Continue for 45 seconds.

Adding nature to your physical activity supplies another layer of stress relief.



after a yoga class; having lower levels of GABA is associated with low moods. Exercise has also been shown to increase certain proteins, such as brain-derived neurotrophic factor (BDNF); low levels of BDNF are associated with a greater risk of depression. In one study at McMaster University in Ontario that tracked BDNF levels, six weeks of regular exercise helped previously sedentary college students protect against depression, whether they did steady cardio or HIIT, high-intensity interval training (that is, alternating sprints with steady cardio).

### HOW TO REENERGIZE

You could expect to feel about 40 to 75% more energetic after a half-hour workout, according to a recent study

in *Sport, Exercise, and Performance Psychology*. Whether exercisers did steady cardio, HIIT on a stationary bike or high-intensity functional training (HIFT) consisting of boot camp moves, “all three exercise types increased the participants’ feelings of energy,” says lead researcher Katie Heinrich, PhD, a professor of exercise behavioral science at Kansas State University. In particular, it was the HIFT workout that caught the scientists’ eye for its extra feel-good effect as their experiment went beyond merely measuring the post-workout energy bump.

It also tested to see which routines lifted exercisers’ feelings of “activation” into an energetic state of mind and which also increased enjoyment. Only HIFT hit both marks.

Sprint intervals were as energizing as HIFT but enjoyment waned as the workout went on; steady cardio sparked enjoyment but, even after the energy boost, exercisers’ ratings technically kept them in the calm zone. “Generally speaking, the shifting of activation is tied to the intensity of the workout,” explains University of Central Missouri assistant professor and study co-author Derek Crawford, PhD, of why higher intensities are better at making us feel energetic. As for why HIFT stays fun, he thinks the variety of exercises might be one key.

The bottom line is whether you’re looking for a way to rev up or unwind, there’s a workout that can do it for you—such as the samples here. Try a few, or whichever suits your mood on a particular day.

## A YOGA FLOW FOR MIND AND BODY RELAXATION

“This routine is nice to gently sensitize you to how you feel, respond to and release areas holding stress,” says Tara Stiles, owner of Strala Yoga studio in New York City and author of *Clean Mind, Clean Body*. “As a result you’ll feel better, more connected and better able to roll off stress when it comes your way.” Start by sitting on the floor and taking 10 long, deep breaths, then follow Stiles’ cues for a flow you can do anywhere, anytime to unwind.

### ► Gentle Side Stretch

Lean to your right side, letting your right forearm rest on the floor. Move from your middle, and let your arms and the rest of you go along for the ride. Hang in the places that feel a little tight and stuck. Give yourself attention in those places like you would listen to a good friend who asks for help. Hang here for a few long, deep breaths and go for the other side.

### ► All Fours Rolling Around

Crawl yourself around onto all fours. Squish your hands into the floor like you would some nice wet sand. Roll around here or alternate cat (rounding your back) and cow (arching your back) pose, whatever feels nice for you. Hang out in the places that feel a bit stuck. Notice how you feel not only physically, but also emotionally.

### ► Seated Wide-Leg Stretch

Crawl back around to sit on your hips. Lean back and support yourself with your hands. Stretch your legs out to your sides a bit. Open to a place that feels like a good stretch, but not forced. Lean back into your hands. Take a big inhale and hang here. Exhale and crawl yourself forward a bit. Roll around side to side.

### ► Both Legs Forward Stretch

Bend your knees a bit and bring your legs together in front of you.

Crawl back and support yourself with your hands. Take a big inhale and lean back. Exhale, roll yourself forward and around side to side, however it feels useful for you. Hang in those tight areas and breathe deep.

### ► Lying Down Back Release

Gently roll down to the ground, carrying your legs with you, to be easy on your back. Grab ahold of your knees and let your legs fall away from you. You should

feel a nice release from the top of your head down through your tailbone. Hang here for a few long, deep breaths.

### ► Easy Lying Down Twist

Gently hug your knees into your chest. Let your legs fall toward one side and rest on the ground. If your legs don’t rest on the ground easily, bring your arm or a pillow under them for support. Hang here for 10 long, deep breaths. Go for the other side.



The mindfulness component to yoga can further enhance its feel-good effects.



Sleep not only helps replenish every cell, it also helps us resolve negative emotions.

# KEYS TO DEEP SLEEP

Perhaps your best offense against mental strain and drain is a strong defense, and that's where optimizing the quality of your nightly rest comes in.

| by Mary Anderson |

**T**hink of sleep as hitting a reset button: As you remain blissfully unaware, the body goes to work replenishing every cell. So you want to give it the uninterrupted time it needs to get the job done right—between seven to nine hours nightly, or seven to eight for those 65 and older. “Regular synchronized sleep in optimal quantity and quality has been shown to restore and revitalize the whole body more efficiently,” explains Abhinav Singh, MD, medical director of the Indiana Sleep Center in Greenwood and an expert for the Sleep Foundation. “This includes feeling refreshed, resolving negative emotions, consolidating memory, repairing muscles and energizing you for a successful day.”

All of this means that you will not only start off with a lower level of cortisol (the stress hormone also awakens first thing in the morning to get us moving) but you will also be more resilient throughout the day as mental pressures arise. Take,

for example, recent findings in the journal *Stress Health*, which looked at people's sleep habits and then measured how well their bodies rebounded after a stressful task. Those study participants who slept less soundly took longer to come

experience a recurring, 90-minute (or so) cycle that replays in a loop between four to six times until you rise and shine. Within each of those 90-minute cycles, you pass through four stages of sleep. (Picture your body doing four to six

**33%** of adults aren't regularly getting the amount of sleep that they need

Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

down from fight-or-flight mode, prompting the scientists to conclude that “poor sleep is associated with prolonged affective recovery from a stressful event.”

## ALL IN A NIGHT'S WORK

As bedtime nears, the darkening environment cues your brain's pineal gland to secrete melatonin. This hormone increasingly circulates in the bloodstream, acting like a sleeping pill to make you drowsy and ultimately snooze.

Though it may seem like you inhabit just one steady, lights-out state all night, you actually

loads of laundry, with each load going through the soak, wash, rinse and spin stages.) In stage one, you're dozing for maybe 10 minutes before melting into stage two, the light sleep phase lasting some 25 minutes where breathing and heart rate slow and muscles relax. Deep sleep is stage three and lasts between 20 to 40 minutes, followed by rapid eye movement, or REM, sleep—this is the roughly 10-minute part when you dream. And just when you get to the good part where you're saving the planet, the cycle begins all over again.

### WHEN STRESS THROWS A WRENCH INTO THINGS

It all comes back to stress hormones running interference with the body's unwinding process. When cortisol and adrenaline levels are elevated, it's a recipe for increasing blood pressure and alertness.

"This impedes the natural rise of melatonin and keeps our minds active," explains Dr. Singh—meaning it makes it harder to fall asleep. "Stress can also lower the quality of sleep by causing more fragmentation of sleep. It can lower deep sleep fractions or smooth sleep state transitions."

Even as society shut down during the height of the pandemic, potentially clearing our schedules of the commutes and commitments that cut into our ability to get extra shut-eye, research in the journal *Sleep* showed that the added stress trumped all, no matter if you were a night owl or an early bird. "During the pandemic, all types had more sleep problems," says lead study author Ilona Merikanto, PhD, a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Helsinki who, along



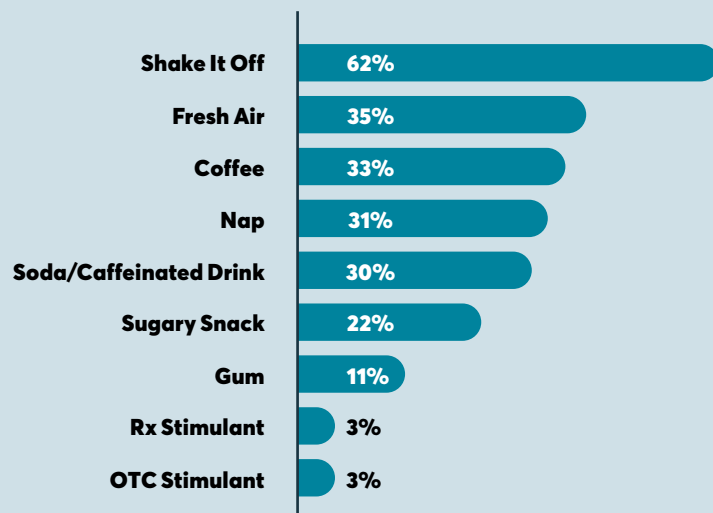
with her colleagues, polled 19,267 people worldwide on their sleep between May and August 2020. "During the pandemic, you worry about your economic situation, you worry about your own health and the health of your close ones," says Merikanto. "It has really taken away any of these benefits [of potentially more flexible sleep hours]." Those who fared the worst were people who typically fall asleep later at night based on their body's inner workings versus their binge-watching habits. "Their melatonin rhythm is later than for other types, so their physical fall-asleep time is also at a later time," she says. And in a society that sets its open for business time at 9 a.m., that can cut into their reaching the seven-hour minimum of nightly sleep.

### CONSISTENCY IS KEY

So what to do in stressful times? One of the golden rules that health experts will tell you for attaining optimal rest is very straightforward: Aim to have a regular bedtime and wake-up time. "Sleep-wake rhythms are an example of circadian rhythms," says Singh, referring to the body's internal 24-hour time clock. "If we continue to change the onset of sleep times and wake times, it desynchronizes the system, like musicians playing their pieces at different time signatures." If you do the math based on the time your alarm clock is set to start your daily hustle, you'll need to be asleep somewhere between seven to nine hours earlier than that each night. "When you get into this routine, and if the routine is following your biological needs, you really don't have to stress about falling asleep," says Merikanto. "Your body really does it for you."

For night owls who seek to get in sync, gradually going to bed 15 minutes earlier may help reset them to a bedtime that better conforms to their daily schedule. One thing that is counterproductive? Trying to catch up on sleep on the weekends. "Even though evening types would try to sleep off the unbalanced rhythm [from] the week on the weekends, it doesn't help," says Merikanto. "It's actually making the circadian clock even more disoriented." Your best bet is to stay within an hour or so of the same time you wake up normally during the week. It's this consistency that's the bottom line to reaping the maximum body benefits of sleep—whatever stress awaits.

### HOW WE DEAL WITH SLEEPINESS



Source: The Sleep Foundation's Sleep in America Poll, 2020



### YOUR LIGHTS-OUT ROUTINE

"Preparing a good internal and external environment around you before sleep time is key," says Abhinav Singh, MD. Begin by decreasing the stimulation around you starting at least two hours before bedtime. Step one is to power down all tech screens, as the blue light they emit especially suppresses the body's release of the sleep-inducing hormone melatonin. Next, prep your bedroom with this checklist from Dr. Singh: dim lights, cool environment, comfortable bed, quiet room. Use your unwinding time to relax your mind. "There is an incredible affirmation to tell yourself: 'Letting go,'" says clinical psychologist Susana Galle, PhD, director of The Body-Mind Center in Washington, D.C. "What you need to let go of the most is any conflict. Use a mental imagery that you have a set of drawers and you are putting this conflict in one of them that is labeled 'later.'" You may find that simple shift puts a pause on thoughts that would otherwise keep you up.

Having houseplants in your line of vision could provide an opportunity to lower your heart rate.

# CENTERING YOUR SPACE

These simple moves can help reduce potential stressors within your home and make it more soothing.

| by Mara Santilli |

**W**

e've been spending a lot of time cooped up in the house these last two years. That may have prompted painting, renovation projects and Marie Kondo-ing galore. But the reality is that we spend more than 85% of our daily life indoors according to scientific estimates, and those environments can have an impact on our well-being.

For example, ever notice that you're extra frazzled when you come home to your belongings in disarray? There's a psychological reason why. "It has been documented that clutter in the home does increase cortisol," explains Victoria D. Coleman, PhD, a clinical mental health counselor and behavioral health specialist based in Las Vegas. She cites one study from UCLA that found a link between high cortisol levels in women with "a high density of household objects" in their home, although men experienced less of an impact. "One might feel stressed or anxious because the cluttered environment provides

fewer opportunities to feel in control, organized or empowered," Coleman explains.

But even beyond tidying up, there are small adjustments that can make your living space healthier for both mind and body.

## ARRANGE SOME HOUSEPLANTS

Simply adding greenery can increase calm. A recent study at the University of Hyogo in Japan found that when office workers took a three-minute rest, their pulse rates were more likely to decrease significantly if there was a plant on the desk. Another study from the *Journal of Physiological Anthropology* found that taking care of your greenery could help calm down your nervous system; those who were tasked with potting a plant significantly decreased their blood pressure.

## SWITCH TO WET DUSTING

Dry dusting can actually stir up dust, including endocrine-disrupting chemicals (EDCs) which

may potentially mimic or block the function of the hormones that regulate your immune system, metabolism and more. In fact, phenols and phthalates are just two types of EDCs commonly found in up to 90% of indoor dust from household materials like vinyl, according to a study at George

50%

of people polled said they get stressed by having a messy house. Nearly as many (49%) noted it made them anxious.

Source: HomeAdvisor.com poll of 1,000 people

“  
Yellow lights  
have been shown  
in clinical studies  
to be calming  
and relaxing.”

— SUSAN ALBERS, PHD

Washington University. “Dust with a damp cloth and wet mop instead, so that it doesn’t mobilize the dust. We don’t want you to breathe it in, or get in on your skin,” study author Veena Singla, PhD, says.

### INCREASE AIR FLOW

Introducing healthier air could be as simple as getting more ventilation in your house, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Cracking a window, and even the door when possible, is the first step to clearing away many contaminants, from chemicals to germs, but also reducing carbon monoxide when you’re cooking with a gas stove. Although there are no standards for what a safe level of carbon monoxide indoors is, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) notes that the gas at low levels can cause fatigue.

### ADJUST YOUR LIGHTING

“Yellow lights have been shown in clinical studies to be calming and relaxing,” says Susan Albers, PhD, a clinical psychologist at the Cleveland Clinic in Ohio. Look to install soft white bulbs in your living room, bedroom and any work-from-home space. Of course, your house is likely filled with screens, from TVs to laptops and smartphones. Since all that tech emits blue light—the type that suppresses melatonin production—you will want to dim devices in the evening and aim to switch off an hour or two before your bedtime.

### LET THE SUNSHINE INTO YOUR ROOM

Vitamin D is known as the sunshine vitamin because the body converts the ultraviolet rays that hit your skin into this crucial nutrient, which is associated with regulating mood and supporting our immune system. Yet many of us lack sufficient amounts: One study in *Mayo Clinic Proceedings* found some 25 to 50% of patients to be deficient in vitamin D. Low levels are linked to seasonal affective disorder (SAD), a type of depression that occurs in wintertime when days are shorter and grayer. If you don’t have a sunny spot, a sun lamp can help. The devices have been shown to boost vitamin D production.

### MIND YOUR CLEANING METHODS

Even products that you use to erase messes can make their way to your skin and float through the air in your home into your lungs. A study published in the *International Journal of Occupational and Environmental Health* found that 64% of cleaning products tested contained substances that were considered harmful to the skin and respiratory tract. Search for a healthier and more environmentally-friendly cleaner that has a label like “EPA Safer Choice,” Singla suggests.

### SET THE SCENTSCAPE AROUND YOU

Tapping your sense of smell is not just a smart method to make you more present. A review of the protective mental effects of essential oils in the journal *Frontiers in Aging Neuroscience* noted the use of aromatherapy for treating anxiety in cancer patients, specifically with the scent of bergamot. Putting a few drops of the essential oil onto a mini wooden diffuser or atop a pure wax candle

can fill a room. (Note that synthetic versions in home fragrances and scented candles don’t equate as oils and some may contain EDCs.)

### TRY SOME BACKGROUND MUSIC

Creating a soothing playlist may set a beneficial tone. Research published in *Health Psychology Review* found that listening to music generally can lower cortisol and boost endorphins. Nature soundscapes can have a similar effect, according to a 2017 study in *Nature*. Study participants who tuned in to nature-related sounds experienced a decrease in their fight-or-flight response as well as their heart rate. Coleman suggests sampling ambient playlists on Spotify to find one that works for you.

### ONE-STEP FENG SHUI

While this Chinese approach to room design is not a decluttering method, it does center on configuring one’s environment to have a certain flow—namely to harmonize with the vital energy known as qi. “The goal of feng shui is in harnessing the natural cycles in nature and bringing them into our space,” explains Betty Wang, a New York-based feng shui consultant at Feng Shui Canary. “Similar to the blood flow in our body, we want fresh qi to flow freely.” She notes that energy will only be able to move through your space if there’s a clear path for it and that starts at the entrance to your home. “One of the simplest things to ensure you have positive energy in your space is to check your front door,” says Wang. “Keeping it free from obstacles is key.” She advises moving shoes or bulky purses and jackets into closets to clear your path—and your view.

Take opportunities to soak up sunlight and begin to dim screens after sundown.





Taking a 10-minute break outside can lower cortisol levels and blood pressure.

# GET INTO A GREEN MINDSET

Even in small doses, experiencing nature has a reflexive calming effect on the body. Making the most of these fresh-air moments can have a meaningful impact.

| by Lauren Mazzo |

**I**t's a good thing that Americans are turning over a new leaf and rekindling our contact with nature. According to the latest stats, we are getting active outside in record numbers: About 7.1 million more Americans headed out for recreation in 2020 than in the year before, per the Outdoor Industry Association.

What difference can seeing more green make? Actually, it's hard to find something nature doesn't do for your mental and physical health. As little as 10 minutes in nature can move the needle on many physiological and psychological metrics of stress, according to a Cornell University review of studies focusing on college-aged adults. Researchers noted that 10 to 30 minutes of sitting outside in a natural environment led to a significant decrease in heart rate, cortisol levels and blood pressure, as well as a "significant increase in parasympathetic nervous system [rest and digest] activity, and a

significant decrease in sympathetic nervous system [fight or flight] activity." Participants also reported an increase in calm, comforting feelings, and an overall sense of being refreshed and restored.

Those mental boosts add up. "The psychological benefits of connecting with nature are feeling good and functioning well—and feeling life is worthwhile," says Miles Richardson, PhD, head of the psychology

**120  
Minutes**

The length of weekly time spent in nature that is associated with the greatest level of well-being

Source: Scientific Reports

department at the University of Derby in England and its Nature Connectedness Research Group. One of the group's latest reviews, published in the *Journal of Happiness Studies*, analyzed 50 research studies involving 16,396 people. It found that, in adults, connection to nature is associated with higher levels of personal growth and eudaimonic well-being—the type of happiness or contentment achieved through self-actualization and sensing a meaningful purpose in one's life.

Part of this benefit owes to nature's ability to provide perspective—just think of the last time you stood in front of an expansive landscape or marveled as an army of ants assembled to march across your front step. "Being in nature increases our awareness of our environment and reframes our sense of self to connect with the greater whole," says Angeleena May, LMHC, executive director for AMFM Healthcare, a mental and behavioral health treatment center in Southern

53%

## of Americans (a record percentage) who did outdoor recreation at least once per year

Source: Outdoor Foundation's 2021 Outdoor Participation Trends Report

California. "Feeling connected to something greater than ourselves, such as a vast forest or endless ocean, decreases thoughts of personal dissatisfaction and increases optimism and hope for the future."

And the beauty is that you don't need access to a postcard-worthy view to reap benefits. Most any nearby green space can fill your nature quotient. For example, in a study at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, researchers asked 36 people who lived in an urban environment

to spend at least 10 minutes in an outdoor spot that offered a "sense of contact with nature," at least three times a week. Judging by the decrease in biomarkers such as cortisol, they experienced significant stress reduction, with the greatest dip after 20 to 30 minutes. Beyond that duration, the calming effects continued, but at a slower rate.

Do some gardening during your outdoor time and you could derive added perks. "There are also the benefits of the unseen. The good bacteria that help keep us well are more common in natural spaces," says Richardson. At Tampere University in Finland, when researchers dipped people's hands in soil daily for two weeks, they found that it increased the participants' gut microbial diversity—an indicator of a healthier microbiome. As more research connects gut health with mental health, this bonus is further feel-good news. Try any of the ideas on these pages to get a dose of nature and its stress-busting potential.

## CREATIVE WAYS TO PLAY MORE OUTDOORS

### ► Plot a Course

Check the AllTrails app (or go to [alltrails.com](https://www.alltrails.com)) to find a hiking path near you, including its length and difficulty rating. Runners can do the same with MapMyRun ([mapmyrun.com](https://www.mapmyrun.com)) and cyclists can try Strava ([strava.com](https://www.strava.com)).

### ► Head for the Water

Use the AnyFinder app ([apps.apple.com](https://apps.apple.com)) to find a nearby lake or beach using the search word filter. Paddling.com has a map of over 48,000 canoeing and kayaking launch sites.

### ► Take Your Meditation Outside

Try the Nature Meditations Deck (\$17, [amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com)) from Kenya Jackson-Saulters, founder of the Outdoor Journal Tour. The handy set of cards lists bite-sized,

mindfulness practices that tap into the power of nature while you stroll your local park

### ► Link Up With Others

The Road Runners Club of America ([rrca.org](https://www.rrca.org)) lists running groups across the country. If bird-watching is more your speed, spread your wings and find clubs through the American Birding Association ([aba.org](https://www.aba.org)).

### ► Pitch a Tent

It's never been easier to go camping, whether you want to rough it or not. The website ReserveAmerica.com allows you to filter campsites nationwide by amenities such as access to restrooms. Outfitters such as tentrr.com offer both private sites and those on parklands with no equipment required. Got an RV?

HarvestHosts.com has a network of nearly 3,000 scenic spots nationwide where you can park for a \$99 annual fee.

### ► Brush Up Your Skills

Learn a new sport or talent you can put to use outside—including rock climbing, mountain biking, and more—through REI Co-op's classes, events and day trips. Find options at [rei.com/events](https://www.rei.com/events).

### ► Go off the Grid

The outfitter 57Hours ([57hours.com](https://www.57hours.com)) connects you with certified local guides who can take you on outdoor adventures—stateside, or abroad. Whether you book ice climbing in Montana, surfing in Miami Beach, or paddleboarding in Brooklyn, there's something for nearly every sport and locale.

## HOW TO SOAK IT ALL IN

Your free mental reset is right outside your front door. "Simple interactions with everyday nature can be powerful," says psychologist Miles Richardson, PhD. "Noticing the good things in nature each day for a week has led to significant and sustained benefits to mental health."

### ► Take Quick Peeks

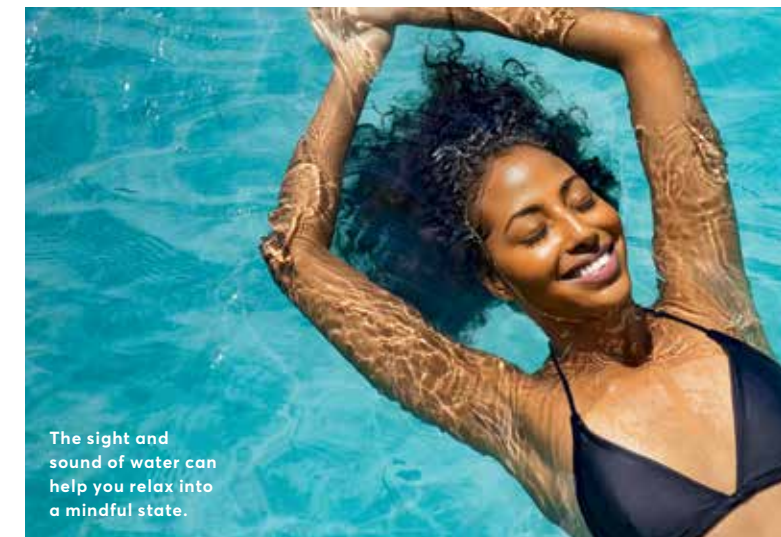
In a University of Melbourne study published in the *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, researchers asked college students to complete a tedious task pressing a computer key in response to certain numbers flashing on a screen. Those who took a microbreak looking at a flowering meadow green roof for 40 seconds midway through the task made significantly fewer mistakes and showed more consistent response than students who looked instead at a concrete rooftop. Choose a work-from-home location with a nature view so you can refresh your mind every time you glance away from the screen.

### ► Seek out Greens and Blues

"Studies have shown greenery, leaves, and trees have a substantial impact on brain activity related to decreased stress," says Angeleena May, LMHC. Blue is valuable, too. "Oceans, streams, and water sources activate both visual and auditory senses, which is correlated with mindfulness and connecting your body with the environment." In a review of 35 studies, researchers from the University of Barcelona found that exposure to outdoor blue spaces—those that feature water—was linked to better mental health and more physical activity.

### ► Get Grounded

When you're out in the backyard or park, try spending some time barefoot. This technique, sometimes called "grounding" or "earthing" can help with pain management, stress, and sleep, according



The sight and sound of water can help you relax into a mindful state.

to research in the *Journal of Environmental and Public Health*.

### ► Tune In

Give some attention to the soundscape outside. A review of 18 studies done in Carleton University in Ottawa, Canada, found that water sounds were most effective at improving mood and that bird sounds were actually the best for lowering stress. Meanwhile, a University of Chicago study found that people who listened to a mix of nature sounds, such as crickets chirping or wind, performed better on difficult cognitive tests than those who listened to urban sounds, such as traffic. If you can't access the real thing, an app like Headspace (available for iOS and Android) offers calming nature sounds.

### ► Green Your Screen Saver

Studies show that even just looking at photos of nature can offer a bit of benefit, says May. A 2015 study published in the *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public*

*Health* found that just five minutes spent looking at nature images helped support the body's ability to recover from stress.

### ► Actively Appreciate the Nature Around You

Many people technically do things outside or in nature, but it's often simply a backdrop while their attention is otherwise preoccupied. In that case, they might be spending time in nature but not connecting with it. "The sights and sounds can fall into the background," says Richardson. To truly reap the benefits, tune in using what he calls the Green Care Code: Simply pause, look, listen and enjoy nature. In other words, put down the smartphone and take out the earbuds. You owe that dose of connection with nature to yourself—and to the planet, says Richardson. "It's emerging as a basic psychological need," he says. "A need that unites human and nature's well-being for a good life and a sustainable future."

A quick hug results in your body experiencing lower stress levels for about half an hour.



# THE SUPERPOWER OF CONNECTION

Science shows that we really are stronger—and healthier and happier—together. And harnessing social support is an easy way to reduce your stress quotient.

| by Lauren Mazzo |

W

Whenever disaster strikes in my life (even the garden-variety type), my

instinct isn't to hide out or isolate—it's always to text, call, or FaceTime my inner circle, stat. Work stress and finance freak-outs go directly to dad. Heartbreak and dating 911s go to my close group of single friends. During pangs of loneliness, I reach out to my college crew. And pretty much everything else? I turn to mom. But sometimes even strangers will do. If there's something trivial I'm fired up or bummed about (think bad customer service) I'll take it to Instagram or Twitter in hopes that those who see it will validate my feelings. Rarely do I stew on a stressful situation utterly alone, and for good reason: When I crowdsource, I feel better instantly.

After all, study after study has shown the health benefits of accessing social support. "For humans, social connections are as essential as food and water," says Johns Hopkins psychiatrist Margaret

“  
Social interaction, particularly in-person interaction...can decrease stress, loneliness and depression.”

— ANGELEENA MAY, LMHC

Chisolm, MD, author of *From Survive to Thrive: Living Your Best Life with Mental Illness*. "They are needed to sustain our lives and to perpetuate the species." She cites the discovery of a healed thighbone found in a 15,000-year-old site as evidence of our long history of cooperation and caring: Surviving a broken femur requires dependence on someone else for food and drink, shelter and physical protection for many weeks. That level of TLC suggests that humans moved past a "survival of the fittest" mentality, and instead evolved to prioritize the survival of the group.

## THE PERKS OF CLOSE RELATIONSHIPS

In modern times, the far-ranging influence of social connections goes well beyond nursing us through broken bones. "Science shows increased connection leads to longer and more fulfilling lives," says Angeleena May, LMHC, executive director for AMFM Healthcare, a mental and behavioral health treatment center in Southern California.

In fact, people with strong social relationships have a 50% increased likelihood of longevity than those with weaker social relationships, according to a landmark 2010 study at Brigham Young University that analyzed 148 different studies (including 308,849 people). It determined the influence of social relationships on the risk of death is comparable to that of negative risk factors, such as smoking and alcohol consumption, and even exceeds the risk posed by physical inactivity and obesity. Another study—this one conducted at Harvard and which followed people for nearly

80 years—found that the state of people's relationships has a profound impact on both their happiness and health. The data showed that people's satisfaction with their relationships at age 50 was actually a better predictor of physical health than their cholesterol levels were.

Why does social interaction have such a strong impact on life expectancy? Research from the University of California, Los Angeles, shows that social contact boosts your immune system, whereas exclusion or isolation can increase inflammation and suppress immunity. Meanwhile, researchers from the Massachusetts General Hospital found that social connection is the strongest protective factor against depression.

"Social interaction, particularly in-person interaction and connection, can decrease stress, loneliness and depression," says May. "Being connected to others provides

purpose and belonging, allowing for gratitude when contributing in a meaningful way to others' lives. When we interact with others, expressing emotions to others, our brains release dopamine and endorphins, improving mood and emotional regulation."

And your body can register these calming effects rather quickly. "A single, 20-second hug has been shown to lead to a moderate decline in cortisol within minutes, though it does return to pre-hug levels after 40 minutes," says Dr. Chisolm. "Longer social interactions have been shown to lead to more significant differences in cortisol levels within 15 to 30 minutes."

### WAYS TO HARNESS THE BENEFITS

"We're 'wired' to have various types of relationships, both long-term and fleeting," says Chisolm. "What makes all of our social connections

meaningful is their power to different degrees, to influence our feelings, thoughts, and behaviors (hopefully for good rather than evil ends) so as to improve our happiness and life satisfaction, physical and mental health, character and virtues—all important components to a flourishing life."

And think outside your circle of confidants. One study from the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, Canada, that was focused on examining the value of different types of relationships found that even social interactions with more peripheral members of your social network (i.e., acquaintances) still contribute to your well-being. "I think all human relationships have the capacity to hold significant meaning for us," says Shani Silver, author of *A Single Revolution* and host of *A Single Serving Podcast*. "Who are we to determine for everyone else what counts as family, or why a platonic friendship can't be just as vital to someone's life as a romantic one?"

Just knowing you've got options can bring you peace of mind. "Simply being prepared with a plan can help alleviate anticipatory anxiety, which decreases stress," says Chisolm. "A plan can be scripting a cognitive response to feelings such as 'This anxiety is just a feeling, it will pass.' Or a behavioral response, which can absolutely involve reaching out to others: 'I'll call a friend if I feel like I'm getting stressed.'" Activating that plan early on in the stress response can also help mitigate the amplitude of the stress.

### LEVERAGE VIRTUAL SOCIAL SUPPORT

One of the major highlights to come out of the research done on mental well-being during quarantine is that online socializing does, indeed, count toward your social feel-good quota. One study from UCLA conducted

during the COVID-19 pandemic found that, when in-person interactions are limited, virtually interacting with a greater number of people was associated with better mental health, as demonstrated by decreased feelings of loneliness and increased perceptions of social support.

Of course, it's not perfect. We usually employ all five senses during our in-person interactions, but online, we're limited to sight and sound. "Thus, those who find connection primarily through digital interaction report a higher rate of loneliness," says May. Physical touch, for example, increases connectivity and deepens bonds with those around us, she says, and it's hard to get that through a screen.

What we do know so far is that interactions including voice lead to stronger social connection compared to those without, according to one study in the *Journal of Experimental Psychology*. To get the biggest benefit, rather than texting, pick up the phone, says May. "Any communication with substantial context or regarding one's feelings should be done verbally, preferably video if in-person is not an option," she says. "When having more emotional or sincere conversations, facial expressions, body language,

and tone of voice can greatly influence how one perceives the message." But in a pinch, texting is better than nothing: "Using text, emojis and quick messages can be a way to show you are thinking of one another," she says.

### HOW OUR PETS HELP US

As if you needed more reasons to love your Labrador retriever or tabby cat: Interacting with animals has been shown to decrease levels of cortisol and lower blood pressure, according to the National Institutes of Health. Other research published in the journal *BMC Public Health* has found that animals can reduce loneliness, increase feelings of social support and boost your mood. "Petting an animal results in increased dopamine and decreased cortisol levels within minutes, which leads to decreased anxiety and feelings of stress, and increased feelings of peace and calm," says Chisolm. "They're not called emotional support animals for nothing!" Playing with them also allows for a mental break that has the bonus of boosting your physical activity.

What's more, a Tufts University study found that people with a strong attachment to a pet feel

more connected in their human relationships and communities. Meanwhile, other research at the University of Western Australia determined that dog owners have an easier time making friends—talk about a win-win.

## BE STRATEGIC ABOUT SOCIAL MEDIA

Limiting yourself to 30 minutes a day on social media might help mitigate negative mental health effects such as feelings of loneliness and depression, according to research conducted by the University of Pennsylvania. Use a smartphone app to enforce time limits.

Interestingly, though, simply self-monitoring social media use had a positive effect on study participants—suggesting that the real key is being aware of how much time you spend scrolling, and feeling in control of it. "If you notice frustration around one area of social media that is not healthy, adapt and correct," advises Angeleena May, LMHC. For example, if you join a Facebook group called Healthy Relationships and you later realize most comments are about unhealthy relationships, remove yourself from the group. And her golden rule: Never compare yourself (or your circumstances) to others that you see on social media. "Remember, social media is a platform for a person to show selective qualities and information about themselves," she says. "You're comparing yourself to an intentionally manipulated view of reality."

## MAKE A VIRTUAL PLAYDATE

"A shared experience creates a more meaningful connection between two people," says Angeleena May, LMHC. "And play is a vital part of connecting with others." Try some of these ideas.

- ▶ **Long-Distance Gaming** Download apps *Psych!*, *Words with Friends 2* or *Exploding Kittens* (based on the eponymous card game) to coordinate a virtual game night from afar.
- ▶ **Workout Party** Sweat sessions are simply more fun with friends. Cue up your favorite workout and then use the screen-share feature on Zoom or Google Hangouts so you can follow along with a friend at the same time. Or many fitness sites like Openfit offer live classes with chat functions so you can give each other a shout-out. If you're a Peloton user, use their Sessions feature to sweat together: From the Peloton app, just schedule any class (20 minutes or longer), then send an invite to all your friends to join you.
- ▶ **Host a Movie Screening** Use the browser extension Teleparty (formerly Netflix Watch Party)—which synchronizes video playback and adds group chat to Netflix, Disney+, Hulu and HBO—to play a movie in multiple households.
- ▶ **Put On a Chef's Hat** Choose a recipe, have the ingredients ready, and then prop up your phone, tablet or laptop with a friend or family member who's making the same thing on the other side. When you're done, you can sit down and enjoy a meal you've made together, just from afar.



Petting an animal results in increased dopamine and decreased cortisol levels within minutes.

Try habit stacking:  
As you brush, use  
the time to remind  
yourself of things  
you're grateful for.



# 20 WAYS TO FEEL HAPPIER

Even when life gets challenging, these quick tips can help lift your sense of well-being both in the moment and in the big picture.

| by Lindsey Emery |

**H**ow much can leaning in to positive feelings impact your mind-body health? Consider a recent study in the journal *Psychoneuroendocrinology*, involving women who had recently been treated for breast cancer: As they increased their sense of eudaemonic well-being—the kind of happiness that comes through having a sense of connection and purpose in life—through mindfulness training, they showed a better immune response, even despite the underlying worry about their illness. “It’s important to acknowledge that there’s a lot of stress in the world, and yes, a lot of things can bring you down. But it’s even more important to be aware of all the things that can still make you happy, despite what you might be up against,” says psychiatrist David Baron, DO, senior vice president and provost of the Western University of Health Sciences and former deputy clinical director of the National Institute of Mental Health. Harness the power of a happier mindset here.

## 1 Know There’s More Than One Path to Happiness

“Happiness is about being present and finding a sense of purpose (spiritual well-being); nutrition, exercise and rest (physical well-being); learning and curiosity (intellectual well-being); friendship, love and social interactions (relational well-being); and dealing with painful emotions and experiencing pleasure (emotional well-being),” says psychologist Tal Ben-Shahar, PhD, co-founder of the

Happiness Studies Academy, and author of *Choose The Life You Want: The Mindful Way to Happiness*. “We of course do not need to be thriving in each of the areas, but introducing change in any one or more of these dimensions will positively affect our overall happiness.”

## 2 Get Crafty

“Certain hobbies, like needlepoint, knitting or crocheting, force you to be present and focused

on the task at hand, which can help keep your mind engaged and your anxiety from taking over,” notes Charmain Jackman, PhD, a licensed psychologist and the founder and CEO of InnoPsych, Inc. Research backs her up: A recent survey in the journal *Perspectives in Public Health* revealed that crocheting made respondents—mostly women between the ages of 41 and 60 years old, living in 87 different countries—feel calmer, happier and more useful. And an earlier survey of knitters, in the *British Journal of Occupational Therapy*, showed similar mood-boosting results.

## 3 Donate to a Good Cause

Being generous with your time and/or money could give you a boost, too. One study, published in the journal *Nature Communications*, revealed via functional magnetic resonance imaging that generosity and happiness are linked on a neural level. Participants were given a weekly monetary endowment and

those who committed to spending it on others (e.g., taking friends out to dinner, buying gifts, etc.) over the next month ended up performing more generous acts in general and showing an increased level of happiness than those who agreed to just spend the money on themselves.

#### 4 Simply Remember Your Favorite Things

“Your mind, body and spirit are all connected, and the more we can strengthen the relationship between them, the better—and happier—our lives will be,” says Jessica Schatz, a meditation leader and integrative wellness and biomechanics coach based in Los Angeles. She recommends making a list of about 10 things that complete this sentence for you: “I am following my joy when...” Responses could be making a delicious cup of tea, calling a friend or reading a good book. Then consciously incorporate those items more regularly into your routine. “Research shows that an hour or two of a meaningful and pleasurable experience can affect the quality of an entire day, or even a whole week,” notes Ben-Shahar.

#### 5 Smile!

Research shows that the act of smiling itself could make you happy. (You grinning yet?) A recent review of 138 studies published in the journal *Psychological Bulletin* revealed that facial expressions did have an impact on emotions wherein smiling was found to make people feel happier—and frowning actually makes them feel sadder. “Even forcing a smile triggers a chemical reaction in your brain and releases neurotransmitters, like dopamine, which naturally increases happiness,” says Dr. Baron.

#### 6 Sit in a Room With a View

When you can't be outside in nature, situating yourself next to a window can help: One recent study in



the journal *Ecological Applications* revealed that having a view of trees, plants and/or grass from your window could improve happiness and lower levels of depression, anxiety and loneliness.

#### 7 Try a Mind-Body Exercise

Think qigong, yoga or tai chi. “The practice of qigong allows simple, gentle movements and meditations that help to harmonize our physical, mental and emotional states of being,” says Chris Shelton, author of *Qigong for Self-Refinement*. He suggests doing what's called the “Dry Cry” (or “Heart Healing Sound”): Focus on a situation from the past or present that creates emotional pain for you. Inhale and imagine a pink cloud filling up in your heart as you do. As you exhale, make the “haaa” sound (either audibly or under your breath) and imagine that cloud of emotion leaving your body and landing on the ground in front of you. An analysis of 10 qigong studies in *Frontiers in Psychology* found that the practice improved adolescents' psychological well-being.

#### 8 Say No Sometimes

When it comes to our happiness, less is quite often more. “We are, generally, too busy, trying to squeeze

in more and more activities into less and less time. Quantity influences quality, and we compromise on our happiness by trying to do too much,” says Ben-Shahar. “Knowing when to say ‘no’ to others often means saying ‘yes’ to ourselves.”

#### 9 Appreciate the Small Stuff

Start your day with a positive thought. “What's something small that you can appreciate as soon as you wake up? If you're making your bed and plumping the pillows, instead of thinking of it as a chore, use the moment to appreciate that you have a comfortable bed to sleep in,” says Judy Kuriansky, PhD, a clinical psychologist on the faculty at Teachers College, Columbia University. “The simple little things that we take for granted every day are the very things that give us control and happiness in life.”

#### 10 Make a To-Do List

When you're juggling several different goals, the simple act of making a plan can help eliminate intrusive thoughts and allow you to focus, according to research from Florida State University. “Take a piece of paper and literally dump out all the things clouding up your mind. Goals,

dreams, lists, chores or whatever else you need to remember to do today—write it down,” says Mika Morris, a trainer and sports nutrition specialist based in San Diego. “It can clear up space for you to be in the moment, instead of spending your day feeling overwhelmed.”

#### 11 Keep Moving

Working out won't just make you healthier but happier. A study of more than 2,300 young, middle-aged and older adults in the *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* found that those who had a higher physical activity level were happier and had greater life satisfaction, regardless of age. “To get both the physiological and mental benefits of exercise, do something that's fun and gets your heart rate up at least three times per week,” says Baron.

#### 12 Play Some Music

“All of the Olympic athletes I work with have a special playlist that gets them in whatever mood they want to be in when they work out,” notes Baron. But you don't have to be breaking a sweat to see sound benefits. One study in *The Journal of Positive Psychology* revealed that when college students listened to 12 minutes of uplifting classical music, with the hope that it would improve their moods, they reported greater levels of happiness.

#### 13 Do Something Nice for Someone

The more acts of kindness you do, the more you'll benefit, too. When participants in one study, published in *The Journal of Social Psychology*, performed a variety of kindness activities over the course of one week, their happiness soared. And researchers found a positive correlation between the number of kind acts and the size of their happiness boost.

#### 14 Reframe Minor Upsets

“Oftentimes, when we're feeling unhappy, we have automatic negative thoughts. For example, ‘I really wanted to get my kid the fanciest toy. I can't get them what I wanted, and that means I'm a bad parent,’” notes Baron. Try instead to allow yourself a different interpretation, he says. Remind yourself that your inability to afford something right now is temporary, just like stuff, and then tell yourself five things that you do regularly that truly make you a good parent.

“  
The No. 1 predictor of happiness is the time we spend with people we care about and who care about us.”

— TAL BEN-SHAHAR, PHD

#### 15 Try a Change of Scenery

Whether you're gazing up at the night sky, wandering in a park or exploring downtown, notice the beauty around you. A study published in *Scientific Reports* shows that happiness can be boosted when you're in a more scenic location—and what that looks like (a big city, a rustic farmhouse, an ocean view, etc.) can vary from person to person.

#### 16 Put Your Feelings on Paper

Got a journal? Good. Science suggests that jotting down your thoughts in it can boost happiness within minutes. “Every day, write down and visualize one thing that you are grateful for and another that you are looking forward to,” says Ben-Shahar.

#### 17 Start Your Day With Movement

“The first thing I do in the morning is put my hands on my belly and feel my breath, to feel more connected,” says Schatz. Try it, then move your body, she says—even if it's just for five minutes. “Do yoga, dance, go for a run, whatever makes you happy.” A recent study, published in the *British Journal of Sports Medicine*, found that when adults started their day with a 30-minute walk on the treadmill, their cognition and executive function improved throughout the day.

#### 18 Eat Your Fruits and Veggies

One study in the *American Journal of Public Health* analyzed the food diaries of more than 12,000 people and found that those who increased their fruit and vegetable consumption (from almost none to up to eight portions per day) over the course of two years also experienced greater happiness and well-being. “Regular exercise, adequate sleep and healthy eating habits lead to both physical and mental health,” says Ben-Shahar.

#### 19 Recall Happy Memories

“When you're depressed, it can be difficult to drum up positive thoughts in those moments,” says Baron. “When you're feeling good, you tend to remember things that make you happy. So write down those memories when they pop up, and review them when you're down and need a mental boost and it's just not coming to you naturally.”

#### 20 Hang Out With a Friend

It doesn't matter if you're inside, outside, on the phone or on your computer. “The No. 1 predictor of happiness is the time we spend with people we care about and who care about us,” says Ben-Shahar.

# HOW TO BEAT STRESS

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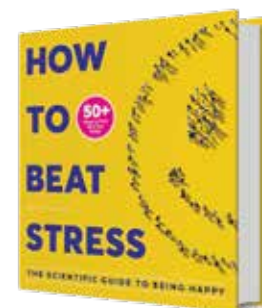
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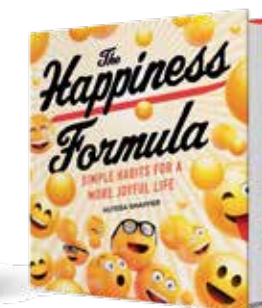
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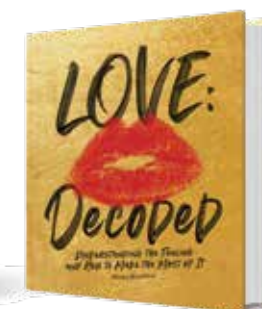
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